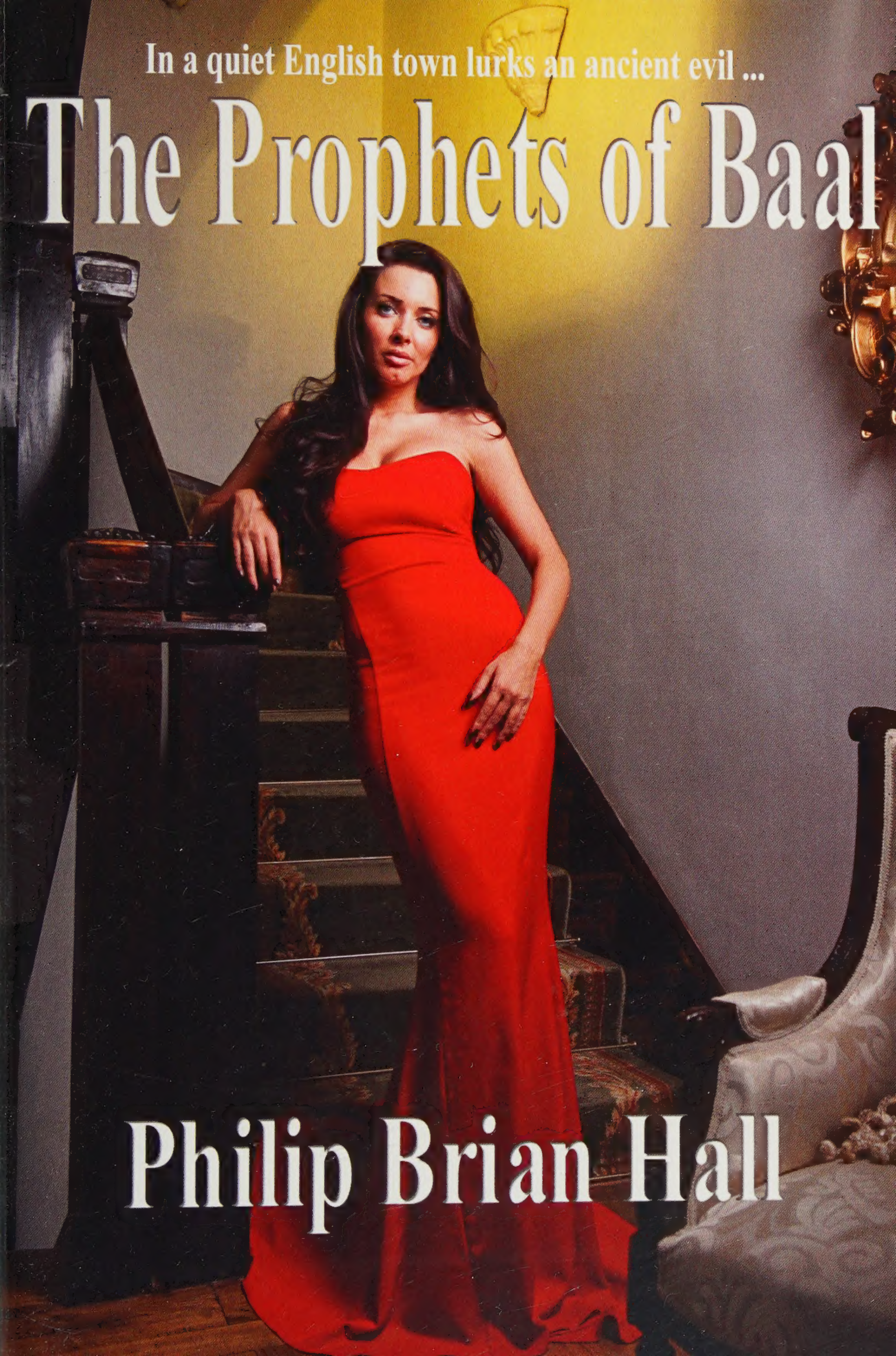

In a quiet English town lurks an ancient evil ...

The Prophets of Baal

Philip Brian Hall

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The
Prophets of Baal

PHILIP BRIAN HALL

Philip Brian Hall

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PROLOGUE: 14:30 Monday 11th December 1999

"One generation passeth away and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever."

The skull stared up from the pit. Bill Watkins stared down. Neither seemed too impressed with the other. It was not that Bill was squeamish. He was a Falklands veteran and had seen more than his share of corpses. Since leaving the army he had found he still could not afford to be over-delicate. Even in the peaceful business of landscape gardening you encountered unpleasant surprises when you worked in neglected land, poking around in the refuse of centuries. As a general rule however these surprises did not include human skeletons.

When the narrow shovel of his machine, dragging through the icy and reluctant ground, caught up part of an old wooden lid, Bill at first envisaged buried treasure. The labourers were working in the former walled garden of a five hundred year old mansion. He felt a tingle of anticipation. Surely there was a chance that valuables had been hidden in the vicinity and then abandoned at some stage in the house's long history. Maybe a cavalier on the run from the Roundheads? Maybe monks from the former abbey, hiding gold from the earlier Cromwell?

Parking the hydraulic arm of the digger on top of the pile of newly excavated soil, Bill dismounted from his cab to take a closer look. At a depth of five or six feet, the shovel had exposed a cavity underneath the lid. Loose fragments of earth were already slipping back into it. There was no treasure inside. Instead, still visible despite the new influx, shone a white gleam of bone.

The front of a cranium and two eye sockets could be seen; the lower jaw was still hidden by dirt. Though damaged and not of great size, the skull appeared human. It might have belonged to a small and delicate person, perhaps a woman or an adolescent. Bill shut down his engine and shouted for Alf Smith, the foreman.

A self-important and officious man, Alf prided himself on his ability to stay calm no matter what mischief the world, and especially the world's weather, threw at him and his crew. In the English Midlands that tended to be a lot. Now he tried to behave as though he unearthed skeletons every day. Climbing down into the excavation, he gently brushed away more of the half-frozen soil surrounding the skull, wanting to be quite sure of what they'd found.

He knew that in the gardens of stately homes it was not uncommon to unearth old bones; the aristocracy of bygone years quite commonly interred favourite dogs and horses near to their houses. Alf had heard of a contractor who had found the remains of a pet ape. That had caused panic followed by embarrassment and Alf had no desire to make a similar fool of himself. These remains however were not simian. Bill looked from the skull to Alf and Alf looked from the skull to Bill.

"I'll phone from the Hall," said Alf. "I'll be right back. Make sure no-one touches anything until the cops arrive."

Bill nodded. His gaze was drawn inexorably back to the empty eyes that glowered up at him from the bottom of the pit as though to accuse him of responsibility for more than just their discovery. Alf's brushing had revealed a roughly circular hole in the skull's forehead. It looked suspiciously like a death wound. A cold shudder gripped Bill Watkins' insides. He had uncovered a murder.

Within half an hour, several white, orange-striped police cars, sirens blaring melodramatically and quite unnecessarily along the empty country lanes around the village, raced down the drive of Borminster Hall and scrunched to a halt in the spacious gravel parking lot that fronted its ornate baroque façade. Just because the victim was long dead the drivers saw no reason not to break the speed limit; Lincoln Police rarely got to play Flying Squad. There followed a certain amount of confusion when no excavations and therefore no skull were to be seen.

The owner of the Hall, Sir Michael Delabor, whose family still occupied one wing despite having made the mansion over to the National Trust, was away on business. Eventually his wife, Nadia, Lady Delabor, emerged from a small service door under the grand entrance steps. Lady Nadia had been alerted by her housekeeper as soon as an agitated and mud-spattered Alf had knocked on the back door and asked to use the phone. She now invited the lost officers to pass through the nether regions of the house and into the back yard, whence she conducted them to the site of the discovery in the walled garden.

Wrapped up warmly against the winter chill in a Burberry raincoat and wearing fur-lined, knee-length boots and a crocheted hat, the austerely beautiful Lady Nadia looked more like a Vogue model than someone dressed for the grisly business of inspecting human remains in her back garden. She was significantly younger than her husband, whose second wife she was, and although her high cheekbones and dark complexion suggested a Slavic extraction, she spoke English with the accent of the north-eastern United States.

She shook her head in annoyance, swishing her long black hair, as she confronted the policemen. On the subject of bones she was already bored; on other matters she gave the impression that she did not share the priorities of the constabulary.

"How long is this going to take?" she demanded of Detective Inspector Thorpe, having quickly discerned which of the policeman was senior. "These bloody workmen already have the house full of mud. They work slowly enough at the best of times and I have an enormous family party planned for Millennium Eve. If you're going to hold them up, nothing will be ready in time."

Thorpe bit back an angry retort. He knew he had to be circumspect. The Delabors were thick as thieves with Chief Constable Gough; the slightest hint of incivility would bring his boss's opprobrium down on his head. Nevertheless he had to do his duty. In addition, murders were rare in his predominantly rural patch and a successful investigation could advance his career even more effectively than annoying Lady Nadia could retard it. He tactfully refrained from pointing out that the workmen were being held up by a dead body rather than by him.

"The pathologist is right behind us, Your Ladyship," he smiled apologetically. "As soon as he gives us the all-clear we'll get everything taken away and have your house back to normal."

"Normal!" snorted Lady Nadia. "Tell me what 'normal' means these days. I always thought the Trust were more trouble than they were worth and now look what they've done!"

Thorpe again required tact. It was unclear whether Lady Nadia was complaining of the Trust's responsibility for the killing or lack of consideration in discovering it. He was tempted, but it was neither the time nor place to comment on the infrequency of murder by JCB.

He gave an almost audible sigh of relief as he was spared the difficulty of further conversation by the sight of the rotund figure of Sturgeon, the pathologist, emerging from the kitchen doorway at the rear of the Hall. Pointing out the doctor to Lady Nadia, Thorpe hastened into the walled garden to ensure that his subordinates had secured the crime scene.

It was immediately apparent to him that there was little point in taping off the area where the skull had been discovered. The walled garden provided its own perimeter and inside it was a sea of freezing mud, criss-crossed by excavator tracks, with hardly a pristine yard where workmen's boots had not already trodden.

The pathologist waddled up to him, smiling in his usual cheery way. "Found a body at last, have we D.I. Thorpe? Let's hope it's a nice juicy case, eh?"

Thorpe had to admit to himself that he had just been thinking the same thing but would never have put it so crassly.

Already clad in his white plastic overall and boots, Sturgeon made his way over to the excavator and the pit beside it. He looked down at the skull. "Not recent," he sighed sadly, turning to look at Thorpe. "Been buried here for years; quite a lot of years, I'd say. Let me have one of your chaps to help me clear away some more of the soil and I'll soon give you a better idea. I saw young Tomkins on the way in, didn't I? He's done this sort of thing before. Not too squeamish and considerably more fingers than thumbs. He'll do."

Recalling that only the previous day he had had PC Tomkins searching through a rubbish tip for two hours, Thorpe opened his mouth to suggest someone else, then thought better of it and went to find the unfortunate constable.

Fifteen minutes later the officer outside the front door of

Borminster Hall reported by radio to Thorpe that a Range Rover had arrived, driven by an IC One female.

No proper way, the Detective Inspector thought, to refer to Sir Michael Delabor's glamorous but profoundly irritating sister, Charlotte Kerridge. He had no doubt that the new arrival would be her; his only surprise was that it had taken her so long.

The voluptuous, red-haired Mrs Kerridge had fingers in a great many Lincoln pies and was hardly likely to stay away from a mystery on her own doorstep. In fact technically it was no longer her doorstep, since she lived with her businessman husband in a palatial villa on the outskirts of Lincoln, but Thorpe was convinced that her spies were everywhere. No piece of Lincoln news of any significance seemed to escape her for more than five minutes and she had been known to embarrass Gough by being on the phone about an issue of concern before the relevant police report had reached him. Gough did not like to be embarrassed.

Thorpe knew that he must tread even more warily around Charlotte Kerridge than around Lady Nadia, though it was a close-run thing. Why, he asked himself, could the body not have been discovered in a more down-market place, such as Sincil Bank Stadium or some farmer's dung heap? But then again, the more exalted the location, the more publicity and the more kudos for the successful investigator.

His ambitions did not stop him being relieved to hear from a further radio report that the IC One female had been met by her sister-in-law and had gone inside the Hall rather than coming around the back to see for herself.

Half an hour after the arrival of Charlotte Kerridge, the officer out front reported the arrival of, "A black Ford Scorpio driven by …"

"Never mind!" Thorpe hissed into the radio. He knew the car and its driver all too well; Sir Michael Delabor was the chairman of the Police Committee.

Sir Michael's arrival meant that Gough would by now be in conference with Thorpe's Superintendent and Thorpe had very little time to prove that he had everything under control, failing which all Hell would break loose. Kicking the accumulated frosty mud off his shoes, he hurried back to the excavation where Sturgeon and Tomkins had almost finished uncovering a complete skeleton.

"Tell me you have something for me," he pleaded with Sturgeon. "His Nibs and his sister have arrived and pretty soon we’re going to have the whole damned clan out here buzzing round us like blue-arsed flies."

The round face of Sturgeon beamed up at him from the pit. "Well I have good news and bad news," he said.

"Give me the good news first, for God’s sake," Thorpe said.

"The good news," Sturgeon replied equably, "is that your victim here, a young female in her late teens or early twenties, wearing a gold necklace, was definitely murdered. She was shot in fact; large calibre; low velocity; short range; back of the head. The hole in the forehead is an exit wound. Like one of those execution-style killings you see in war films."

"That’s great," smiled Thorpe and then recollecting himself, "I mean, that’s terrible, of course! So we’ve got our big case at last then, Doc."

"Then there’s the bad news," Sturgeon went on, his expression unchanging.

"Go on," Thorpe sighed.

Sturgeon grinned back at him. "You aren’t going to be able to catch the murderer."

I - 09:15 Thursday 16th December

"Draw me, I will run after thee."

"How can you investigate a murder that took place two hundred years ago?" asked Fred. "Why should you want to investigate it anyway?"

Good questions, don't you think? Let's suppose you were to put them to your average reasonable man. He'd probably take notice and give up the idea of such a futile investigation. Since the evidence that I'm about to present indicates that I didn't take notice, we must conclude either that I'm not your average reasonable man or that I had nothing better to do than entangle myself in unrewarding and life-threatening trouble. I can draw conclusions like this because I am a detective. That's what detectives do, draw conclusions from the evidence.

Le Tocq, Toby Le Tocq. Blame it on my father. I was born in Jersey.

Back in December 1999, no evidence would have suggested that I was anything out of the ordinary, except in the sense that private detectives are a little less frequently encountered than, say, bus drivers. I did try to glamorise my job by taking on the airs of a Philip Marlowe, but the truth is that most of my work was about as far from the movie image as you could get.

I had been a P.I. for five years. Five years in the big city, as Marlowe would say. Well, all right, five years in Peckham.

Anyway it was five years away from the claustrophobic confines of the family hardware store in St. Helier. It had been five years of scraping the shit off the shoes of smart, civilised, middle class people. I had in that time, so I thought, learned everything there was to know about the seamier side of life. I had a mackintosh every bit as dirty as Marlowe's. I couldn't be bothered with dry-cleaning and anyway dirt tends to blend in quite well with my environment. A half smoked cigarette drooped permanently from the corner of my mouth. I wore a hat to pull down over my eyes when I didn't want to be recognised. I did not drive a Ferrari. Around London I travelled by bus or tube. I did most of my work on foot and in all weathers.

Fred Blomberg, the man asking me the sensible questions, is my partner. He is more than a little over fifty and more than a little overweight. He took me on when he decided that the legwork needed a younger pair of legs. He had become a family friend many years before. You wouldn't think it to look at his stout frame, but Fred is a serious sailor; his idea of a holiday is island hopping in his forty foot yacht. (The business can pay well, but Fred inherited his start-up capital and a fair bit more besides.) Jersey is Fred's favourite destination.His indignation at my proposed investigation was synthetic, but the grounds for it were logical enough. I could put as good a case against my idea as he could.

First objection. I had no experience of modern murder enquiries let alone historic ones. In any case, historic murders are rarely solved; look how The Ripper or The Princes in The Tower still generate controversy today.

Second. It wasn't likely that relatives of the victim would cough up my one hundred pounds a day plus expenses.

Third. I couldn't interview witnesses without a séance. The case might be set in a country house like an Agatha Christie novel but, unlike Poirot or Miss Marple, I couldn't assemble all the suspects in the drawing room for the classic final dénouement. No suspect would conveniently break down and confess to save me the trouble of piecing together the last few clues.

Fourth. Any documentary evidence that wasn't hearsay would be missing.

And so on and so fifth.

"The only thing that's certain is that you'll be wasting time and energy that you could be spending more profitably on the firm's business!" Fred concluded emphatically.

"I'm officially on holiday!" I reminded him sternly.

I'd just come in to let him know where I'd be, in the unlikely event of an emergency and the even more unlikely event of his needing my help. At the time, sitting in front of Fred's desk, drinking taste-free decaffeinated coffee, with my travelling bag on the floor of the office ready for departure, I was naively unwilling to entertain doubts.

The newspaper article that had piqued my curiosity was only a brief story on an inside page, but since I don't care for putting my feet up I need a diversion when I'm not working. I am not the sort to read a book or watch videos and you don't go for country walks in Peckham. You don't go for any kind of walks actually.

Fred was not seriously irritated; when he gets seriously irritated he throws things around the office. He was intrigued by the story. After all, no-one else was rushing to solve it. The police take no action in respect of historic cases. Once the pathologist had certified that the skeleton was a couple of hundred years old it had been of no further interest to the bold gendarmes. I would have done my best to give sensible reasons for my interest had I possessed any.

Instead I said with a touch of exasperation, "Fred, it's just a bit of fun."

"Humph!" Fred's moustache twitched, which meant he was trying to avoid smiling. A genuine mystery made a change from pursuing straying husbands and runaway children. This pays the bills but can get tedious.

"What do we know so far?" he enquired.

"What do *we* know?" I spluttered as a swallow of coffee went down the wrong way.

Looking like a schoolmaster who would dearly love to have confiscated my newspaper cutting, Fred explained in a paternal way that he'd promised my mother he'd keep me out of mischief. He picked up the ashtray and then grimaced and put it back down on the desk.

I reminded him that his doctor had told him to take anger management classes. But since I had no firm plan of action in mind, I didn't mind bouncing a few ideas off my more experienced partner, especially if it was an alternative to his bouncing ashtrays off the walls. So I read him the article:

BONING UP ON BORMINSTER?

The skeleton of a murder victim has been discovered in the garden of Borminster Hall, a well known stately home near Lincoln. Six months into a restoration programme, the National Trust had just started work on a walled garden dating from 1760 when an excavator unearthed a human skull.

Police were called but soon established that the remains were two centuries old.

According to pathologist Frederick Sturgeon, the victim was a young woman who had been shot in the back of the head. Fragments of a coffin were found, but no identification was possible.

The investigating officer, Detective Inspector Thomas Thorpe, reassured local residents that, like his victim, the killer was long dead. "We shall never know how she died," he added, "but yet another intriguing mystery has been added to the colourful history of this part of Lincolnshire."

Borminster Hall is open to the public on weekday afternoons and all day Saturday.

"Hah! PR stunt!" Fred smiled on hearing the last sentence.

"The police wouldn't participate in a hoax," I objected. "And how would you get hold of a two hundred year old skeleton of a murder victim to use in a hoax anyway?"

His face remained creased in a deep frown, lower lip thrust out sceptically. He summarised the evidence: "So - unidentified young female; shot by person unknown; late eighteenth century; buried in a garden, not in hallowed ground. To my mind that suggests ignorance on the part of the authorities; there won't be an official record of the death. This murderer was never caught because nobody knew there'd been a murder … until now."

"Should I start by looking for a Lincolnshire female, born around the third quarter of the eighteenth century, for whom there's no record of death?"

Fred grunted. "That should narrow it down to a few tens of thousands! What about all those who simply left the area? Let's see." He counted the possibilities on his fingers. "It was early in the Industrial Revolution; there would have been rural women going off to find work in the new mill towns, all outside Lincolnshire." One finger.

"During the Napoleonic Wars, women camp-followers trailed soldier husbands all over Europe." Two fingers.

"It was an age of domestic service; rich Lincolnshire families would have taken maids up to their house in London." Three fingers.

"How about elopement? Women swept off to the Highlands by young Lochinvar!" Four fingers and he seemed capable of continuing.

"This woman wasn't buried in the garden of some cottage," I interrupted, rather shaken by all this historical erudition. "She was buried at Borminster Hall. She can't have been a nobody."

Fred was unmoved. "The owners were away at the wars or up in London. The gardener had a bust-up with some local floozy and planted her under the roses. When the lady of the manor got back she probably complimented him on his excellent blooms and enquired what kind of fertiliser he was using!"

This was all too plausible but quite unacceptably dull. Where was the romance in a common (or garden) lovers' fight? Reluctantly allowing myself to be led down the gardener path, I appointed myself counsel for the defence of the falsely-accused horticulturist.

"The gardener wouldn't own a pistol."

"He borrowed one from the house, cleaned it and put it back later. Or it was a musket; he was an old soldier or a member of the local yeomanry. Or maybe it was the gamekeeper with his vermin gun."

My short-lived role as defence attorney was already rocking, despite the accusation being broadened to include a second suspect. I tried again.

"The gardener or the gamekeeper wouldn't have had the political clout to hush up a suspicious disappearance. Other people must have known about this girl, whoever she was. They would have wanted to know where she'd gone so suddenly. Now the owners; they would have had the necessary influence. Anyway, I can start with the owners. I'll find out who was living there then."

"And there, I expect, the trail will go cold. You'll assume the owners must have been involved and that will be that."

Fred placed both hands flat on the desk in a gesture of finality and defied me to produce more excuses. I gave an exasperated sigh. Getting up from my chair, I slapped him on the back and picked up my bag from the floor. I took my empty coffee cup out through the glass door of our shared office into the reception area.

Doreen sat behind her desk with a railway timetable open in front of her. She's five years older than me and she's been with Fred since before he took me on as a partner. She's quite a looker; she can still turn heads. This time though, she gave me her long-suffering look.

"There's a train to Lincoln at 10.30. You can hire a car when you get there. Alternatively, it's about a hundred and thirty miles by road, assuming your old banger can get that far."

I rolled my eyes. "You've been eavesdropping again."

"Since the two of you are about as communicative as an Egyptian mummy, I have to keep my ears open in order to do my job. This enquiry sounds like a wild-goose-chase, Toby."

I groaned wordlessly. I'd had enough of that from Fred.

"Do you want me to book you a hotel room?"

"Don't bother; I'll find suitable accommodation when I arrive." I just wanted to be gone before my idea collapsed entirely.

Fred came out of his office just as I was on my way out of the door. "You'll be back inside a week," he called after me.

Oh but I knew better didn't I? If I was back in a week it would be because I'd solved the case. As things turned out, to have lasted a week would have been a triumph. Within twenty four hours I was knee deep in weird events for which none of my detective experience had prepared me.

Oh and I'd met Sammie of course.

II - 10:30 Thursday 16th December

"All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full."

For several days after December 31st, 1999, I would wake up surprised to find that I was still the same person who'd gone to bed the previous night. To my half-recovered consciousness it seemed incongruous, as though one would normally expect to wake up as someone else.

Of course a good detective might reasonably ask how you would know if you really did wake up as someone else. Unless you recalled the old you, you wouldn't know that you'd changed, would you? A new set of memories would give you a new identity.

No, my problem was that I had two sets of memories in my head at the same time. Neither seemed like fantasy. Both sets were memories of reality. I knew that the person who had done the second set of things was me, but the 'me' in question didn't happen to be Toby Le Tocq.

Perhaps you figure I'm schizophrenic? Am I the subject of care in the community or did I abscond from some institution? You want to know if I'm taking my medication but you ask yourself, 'If he's this crazy when he's on the pills what on earth is he like when he's not?'

Well, I did tell you that I was not your average reasonable man. I suppose the moral of my story might be that personal identity is something too easily taken for granted. Even in an age of electronic identity theft, the crimes of fraudsters stop short at pretending to be you. They do not try to become you; acquire your memories, utilise your store of knowledge, take over your relationships. And yet somehow that was what I had done. The whole peculiar process began not long after I left the office that morning.

On my way to Lincoln I stopped to warm myself at an old pub an hour or so north of London. It was a half-timbered place with small windows; dark inside, but it had a real coal fire and I sat near the blaze. The weather was freezing and my vintage MG had more of a refrigerator than a heater.

It was, as I say, an old pub; maybe the ghosts did walk there, but probably not before lunch. Nevertheless it was when I was sitting looking at those flames that I first thought of Moloch.

At the time I assumed I had read it somewhere, or perhaps half dozed through some archaeological programme on television. I had certainly never researched the topic; there are some odd people needing background work in Peckham but none this odd.

As I sat there it came into my head that the name Moloch does not, as some believe, refer to an ancient middle-eastern god. This common mistake stems from a mistranslation in the King James Bible, where it says that the Canaanites ‘pass their children through the fire to Moloch.’ So people got the idea that Moloch was the receiver of burnt offerings; the god-beyond-the-fire.

Rightly translated the text should say ‘of Moloch’ not ‘to’. Moloch was actually the name of the fire, or to be more exact of a big metal oven in which sacrificial victims were baked alive. The oven was formed in the shape of an idol but the god that it represented was not called Moloch, he was called Baal.

The memory was just a curiosity. I thought nothing of it. Not then. When I felt sufficiently warmed, I resumed my journey.

III - 12:45 Thursday 16th December

"The beams of our house are cedar and our rafters of fir."

Doreen was wrong about the MGTA, because the 'old banger' spluttered into Lincolnshire well before lunch time, though by then its frost-bitten driver was seriously considering trading it in for one of those Riley RM's with the leather roofs and heaters that work.

Yes, you read that right; MGTA. That, my friend, is not one of those mass produced things that they stuck a badge on latterly and called an MG. That is a real MG and I restored it myself. It was manufactured in 1938. I like old cars; they have character and individuality. They look like cars, whereas modern motors all look like each other and none of them look like cars. Granted, vintage vehicles don't like turning corners and feel as if they use bricks for shock absorbers but you can't have everything, can you?

The problem that day was the cold. When this car was made you wore a top coat and gloves when driving to keep warm in the winter. I had fitted a heater to the car during the restoration and obviously disgusted it in the process.

"Wimp," the car seemed to say to me whenever I tried to turn the heater on, "Don't you know my first owner flew a Spitfire in the Battle of Britain?" The heater invariably gave up whenever the temperature dropped below freezing; that is to say, whenever you really needed it.

In Lincolnshire, I took the shortest route to Borminster Hall, about ten miles outside the city and a mile west of the village of Borminster from which it takes its name. There is no minster in Borminster these days. There was one once; an abbey, apparently dating back to Anglo-Saxon times, occupied the site of the Hall before the Dissolution of the Monasteries. The parish church in the village itself is Geometrical Gothic, founded in the thirteenth century. Presumably in the Middle Ages it and the minster existed more or less side by side. There must have been a lot of money in the area at that time.

Today, Borminster is a quiet place with less than a hundred houses clustered around a traditional village green and traditional duck pond. It's quite attractive, without being the sort of place where you would stop your car and take photographs. The main road from Lincoln to Market Rasen runs through the middle of it. There are two pubs, one of which has been expanded into a motel using a completely different style of architecture from the original building; they should never have got planning permission for that, but it did come in handy for me. A couple of shops and a branch library serve the needs of the villagers; a couple of shivering ducks inhabit the duck pond and that more or less sums up the amenities.

I found my way to Borminster Hall easily enough. There was a sign outside the entrance that suggested visitors weren't welcome before 2 pm, but the main gates were open so I drove up towards the house. I like to take the bull by the horns; you can wait for ever to be invited you know. Anyway, somehow people find it impossible to be annoyed with the driver of a MGTA.

An avenue of limes came to an end a couple of hundred yards from a Baroque façade and as I emerged from the trees I stopped to admire the vista across the home park. A little research had told me that the southern front of Borminster Hall had been constructed in the eighteenth century. Most of the sixteenth century manor house had been demolished but the rebuilding was incomplete; it looked as though the builders had lost interest, or more likely the patrons had run out of money. The eastern wing alone looked to have been part of the Tudor house.

From the central part of the façade a broad stone staircase, guarded on each side by giant stone heraldic beasts, descended to the courtyard from the first floor, where a ceremonial entrance was half hidden behind four huge Corinthian columns bearing an overhanging pediment. It was easy to imagine Victorian carriages delivering their elegant occupants to some grand ball in such a setting. I could almost see the tall hatted gentlemen and their ladies in swishing crinolines. With a little more imagination I might have been able to hear the music and laughter from the house and the clink of harness and hoof as coachmen below manoeuvred their landaus for the best position.

I drove on. In nine out of ten cases today such stately homes were simply picturesque relics that ate money faster than the former occupants of their stables had consumed hay. It seemed unlikely that the grand entrance would nowadays be the regular way in. Modern occupants of these places seem always to live in minor wings and use the old servants' entrances, especially when the house is open to the public. It keeps the cost down but it spoils the image.

Sure enough there was a door that looked used around the side of the grand flight of steps. A Range Rover was parked on the gravel outside it. A little further away were a black Ford Scorpio and a chartreuse Mini with flowers painted on the doors and bonnet. The Scorpio was nearly new. The Mini looked as if it might have been new when the Beatles were popular; the rust was the only thing holding it together. The owner had to be a university student; the sort of person who still had *that* poster of Guevara on the bedroom wall. I parked the TA beside the Mini where it would feel more at home.

There was an illuminated bell push beside the servants' door. I rang it. After some delay it was answered by a dumpy, dark haired woman wearing a black dress and a white apron. She was the high side of fifty, with more than a tendency to a moustache and a hairy mole on her right cheek.

"Yes please," she said in a strong Spanish accent.

With my best travelling-salesman-offering-you-the-bargain-of-a-lifetime smile, I handed over my business card and asked if would be possible to speak to Sir Michael Delabor for a few minutes.

"He is expecting you," she said.

"Er, no, I'm not expected. I could come back later if it's not convenient."

"He is expecting you," repeated the Spanish lady. "You come this way please."

She retreated into a passageway beneath the stairs which in turn led into a broader corridor running the width of the house at the ground floor level. I was surprised at being invited in, but I reckoned that the time to sort out the case of mistaken identity would be when I got to see the owner.

Sir Michael Delabor, fifth baronet, was, according to Who's Who, a minor figure in merchant banking. His post sounded to me like a sinecure designed to secure a good name on the company letterhead. Not a lot of top bankers live in Lincoln. Aged forty-two, he was married to a lady of Lithuanian extraction, his second wife, whom he had met as part of a delegation advising the Vilnius authorities shortly after the fall of communism. She was ten years younger than he. They had no children, though Sir Michael had a twenty year old son by his first wife; a Frenchwoman who had died during the 1980's. He clearly had cosmopolitan tastes in women.

The corridor was lined on the inner wall with oil paintings, whilst on the outer wall a series of large windows looked out into a section of the courtyard flanked by the front steps and the west wing. The paintings included hunting scenes, equestrian portraits and landscapes of Borminster Hall seen from different parts of the estate. They might have been of some modest value, but the corridor's paintwork and wallpaper were well past their decorate-by date and the carpet was threadbare. From the fact that he had handed over management of his house to the National Trust I could already have concluded that Sir Michael Delabor was not sufficiently affluent to maintain his patrimony.

The Spanish housekeeper conducted me into a well-lit drawing room on the ground floor of the west wing. The furniture was substantial but of Victorian vintage and not particularly valuable. Portraits in dress ranging from Georgian to modern were interspersed on the walls with gilt-framed mirrors. A large log fire burned in a black marble fireplace with a wrought iron grate. The room was comfortably warm and smelled of a mixture of wax polish and wood smoke. I allowed the housekeeper to take my coat, though I expected to have to take it back again when the Delabors found out who I really was.

There were five people already there. One was a senior policeman, in uniform; three were women. I made myself a wager that the long-haired young blonde wearing blue jeans and a sloppy red sweater was the owner of the decorative Mini parked outside. The other two women looked thirty-something and both were smartly dressed and well-groomed; their clothes looked expensive.

The second man detached himself from the group and extended his hand. He had the bucolic appearance of the archetypal English country gentleman; tweed jacket with leather elbow patches, cavalry twill trousers, brown brogues, a Paisley pattern cravat; even a handkerchief tucked into the sleeve. The florid complexion and military moustache suggested an army background, which my research told me he did not have. He had a glass in his left hand.

"Mr Le Tocq?" he said, with an upward twitch of the eyebrows as he grasped my right hand firmly and held on to it for some seconds, "I'm very pleased to meet you. I'm Michael Delabor."

'My assistant' had, it seemed, rung to ask permission for me to call. Doreen, having anticipated that I wouldn't think to smooth my own path, had smoothed it for me. I wondered exactly what she had said to have me so well received. Private detectives are not always welcomed, even by people with nothing to hide.

There was nothing funny about Sir Michael's handshake; he wasn't a Mason. That was quite interesting in itself. He was however an expert at deflecting enquiries.

"Oh, I know nothing about the body; the press know as much as I do, dear boy. Mind you, I am surprised that our little rural mystery should attract the attention of a London detective. Not that I'm complaining. The bigger the story, the more paying visitors it will attract to the house, eh? Would you like a drink?" He didn't wait for a reply, but turned to the housekeeper and instructed, "Juana, one more for lunch please."

I hadn't actually encountered *noblesse oblige* in the flesh before. I was a little taken aback. He dismissed my protestations that I could come back at a more convenient time if he was entertaining.

"This is extremely convenient. As you see we have an odd number at present. Bad luck, the superstitious would say, eh? My niece came down from Cambridge, also unannounced, on a similar mission to you. You should get on well."

He turned to include the youngest of the three women in our conversation. "Sammie, I should like you to meet Mr Tobias Le Tocq. Mr Le Tocq is a private detective. Mr Le Tocq, my niece Sammie Chalmers."

Blue Jeans took my hand, smiling. Close up she looked to be in her early twenties and very pretty. It was all natural; she wore no make-up and her hair was wind-tousled. Her eyebrows were just a shade darker than her hair. A few very light freckles were sprinkled across the bridge of her slightly snubbed nose and her cheeks. Her lips were the colour of newly ripened cherries and her face had the healthy glow of someone who spent more time in the open than in the library. A little thrill of recognition went through me. I was not at all sure why, since I had never met her before; I would have remembered. At the time I suspected that it was her quite striking resemblance to Meg Ryan.

"Pleased to meet you," she said. She flashed me a winning smile. "So you're what a gumshoe looks like? Aren't you supposed to have a trench coat and a trilby or have they gone out of fashion? The sheepskin jacket and flat cap don't suit the image." She was observant; I had given up my coat and hat before she came over. Like her uncle she also seemed capable of non-stop talking without waiting for any reply. "But on the other hand warm clothes do go with that extremely nice motor car. I was admiring it as you came up the drive. You are not allowed to leave without taking me for a ride in it. Come and meet my aunts."

She took my arm and, drawing me over to the other two women, presented me to the first, introducing her as Lady Nadia. She smiled at her aunt as she spoke. Her aunt smiled at me. Lady Nadia's appearance was more Latin than Nordic. Her hair was jet black and straight, cut in a fringe across her forehead. She wore it long, hanging half way down her back. Slim, tall and elegant, she could have stepped straight out of an upmarket fashion magazine. She looked me straight in the eye from a height not far short of my own.

"Mr Le Tocq?" she asked, still holding my hand. "Are you French?"

Lady Nadia was one of that large body of eastern Europeans who come complete with New England accents; I have met more than a few and I still do not know how quite so many managed to attend Ivy League universities during the later years of the communist regime.

"A Jerseyman," I said.

I find that Jersey can often be a topic of polite small talk in a way that Jarrow, for example, can't. By Lincolnshire standards it is almost exotic. Also I could live with the implication that I must somehow be related to the island's popular TV detective.

"That's more or less the same thing, isn't it?"

I guess that once upon a time I might have thought the same about Lithuanian and Russian. Since I had been invited to lunch I decided not to give her my usual history lecture.

Sammie was moving on to the next woman, drawn it appeared by politeness rather than enthusiasm. Our arrival had interrupted this lady's conversation with Lady Nadia and she was still standing by in amused silence, as if watching Sammie with a man was something of a joke. Stiffly Sammie introduced the woman as her Aunt Charlotte, Mrs Kerridge.

If I was only an amateur Bogart-as-Marlowe, Charlotte Kerridge was a perfect Lauren Bacall. Sir Michael's younger sister was a striking redhead with green eyes and she held on to my hand for even longer than her sister-in-law, with not a trace of embarrassment at so doing.

There are some women in whose presence I instinctively used to feel nervous. I was not quite sure how a woman qualified for membership of this group; I just knew one when I saw her. Mrs Kerridge was one. I might have been young enough to consider myself God's gift to women but some women have a lot of discrimination when it comes to God's gifts. Mrs Kerridge had poise, an air of total self-confidence and a look that suggested she ate private detectives, amongst assorted other males, for breakfast. Sammie made a face at me from where she stood behind her aunt.

I should have smelled a rat there and then of course. How often do you walk in on a small family gathering where without exception the women are drop-dead gorgeous? An average reasonable man would by this time have been asking himself whether the males of this family made a habit of proposing to photographic models. He would then have rejected the hypothesis, since the evidence of their conversation speedily revealed that none of the three was a bimbo. Me, I just congratulated myself on my good fortune. After all I was here to investigate a crime two centuries old wasn't I? I had no reason to suppose that I should be too concerned with the living.

Sir Michael appeared again at my elbow and whisked me smartly away from the three women to introduce me to the top cop, who turned out to be Lincolnshire's Chief Constable, Mr Stephen Gough. By way of an icebreaker he asked Gough what he thought about private detectives. Well, if you need an icebreaker you may as well use the nuclear variety.

Gough's handshake was firm enough and also not Masonic, but a tenner to a quid he was the sort of policeman who reached the top by being politically adroit rather than a good thief-taker. He chuckled as though Sir Michael had made a joke.

"I've no objection to private enterprise," he rejoined, "though I see little profit to be gained in investigating this case."

I was about to explain that I was not there after profit but Sammie, having rapidly detached herself from the company of her aunts and followed Sir Michael and me across the room, butted in.

"There speaks a non-historian, I suspect, Mr Gough. The pursuit of historical knowledge is its own reward, you know. Also, please remember that those who don't learn from history are condemned to repeat it. I'm sure no policeman would want to see a murder repeated."

Gough looked uncomfortable.

With a live and attractive female body six inches from my shoulder it wasn't easy to think about dead ones. I began to wonder whether perhaps the living twenty year-olds of Lincolnshire might be more fun. Sammie wore just a suspicion of alluring perfume. She was shorter than me by a good six inches and slim, but with a good figure. Her blonde hair hung below shoulder length; glossy, with natural waves. Her clear blue eyes were focused on me, whoever was speaking. I was flattered.

With difficulty wrenching my mind back to the purpose of my visit, I expressed surprise to find that the case merited the attention of the Chief Constable.

"Ah no, it doesn't," Sir Michael smiled. "Mr Gough's visit has nothing to do with that. As it happens, I'm chairman of the Lincolnshire Police Committee. We get together on a regular basis;

this particular meeting was arranged well before all our excitements, eh?"

Gough nodded.

"I always find however that local politics becomes more agreeable after a good lunch," Sir Michael said. Looking at his empty glass I wondered if it was the liquid variety that he had in mind. He asked again if I would care for some mulled wine to warm me up after my drive.

"Go on, you've twisted my arm," I said. "I'd love some, provided the Chief Constable can guarantee there isn't a panda crew outside with a breathalyser."

Gough chuckled. Everyone was being remarkably hospitable today. I decided to push my luck.

"Did your unusual cadaver have any means of identification?" I asked.

"Nothing that would mean much to me, though of course I'm not a detective," Sir Michael replied.

Everyone says that. They all watch the TV shows and they know all the usual questions, not to mention all the usual suspects. Or else they think it's just like 'Cluedo'. Sir Michael however did not look as if he was itching to tell me that Miss Scarlet did it in the library with the gun. He was affable but uninformative.

"There was a crucifix still round her neck," said Sammie, butting into the conversation again. "Solid gold; quite thick links in the chain; worth a good few hundred, I'd say."

It was curious that neither of the men had offered such an important clue. Fine gold necklaces ruled out the majority of the female population; leaving such an item on the body ruled out robbery as a motive.

Sammie hadn't finished. "There was nothing else but fragments of the coffin; if it was a coffin." The deliberate doubt in her voice invited me to ask whether in fact it had not been a coffin. I duly obliged. With enthusiasm she responded.

"I looked at the bits of wood that were recovered. I found sawn and dovetailed ends three feet apart. That's too wide for a coffin's width and too short for a coffin's length, isn't it?"

It registered with Marlowe that this broad was not just a pretty face. It should probably have registered earlier when Sir Michael mentioned Cambridge, but to me I'm afraid pretty faces spoke louder than words. It also registered that Sammie's intervention was becoming unwelcome to her uncle. Sir Michael tried to interrupt her flow of analysis but she must have learned in tutorials that you don't allow yourself to be stopped in the middle of your argument.

"I'm pretty sure that the victim was bent double inside some sort of sea chest or travelling trunk. Now that's unusual, isn't it? Why would anyone dispose of a body in a trunk?"

"Sammie is just like her mother," Sir Michael managed to interject, with an attempt at light-heartedness. "My late sister, Frances had a powerful imagination too." Gough chuckled again; he seemed to find Sir Michael's every observation a pearl of wit.

In fact nothing that Sammie had said relied on imagination, just astute observation. The newspaper had reported that the fragments of wood came from a coffin; a trunk would confirm that the body had been hidden rather than decently buried. So within minutes Sammie had shown me that she had already established three important clues: the victim was rich but not robbed and secretly not devoutly buried. My face would have told Sammie how impressed I was; her face told me that she was pleased I was pleased.

"Far more likely to be nothing more than a regular burial; just mislaid records, eh Mr Gough?" said Sir Michael.

"Indeed, Sir Michael. Not unusual at the time. I believe landowners would often purchase coffins in advance too; ensure themselves a suitable send off, if you know what I mean. In fact I believe you've just such a coffin on display?"

"Quite right," Sir Michael frowned. "My ancestor Sir Richard Delabor acquired it for himself in the 1850's but was then improvident enough to succumb to dysentery during the siege of Sebastopol. They buried him in The Crimea."

"And not even thrifty Victorians fancied being carried to their last resting place in someone else's coffin?" I asked.

"But this wasn't a coffin!" insisted Sammie. She was tenacious; like a little terrier she clung on to her idea despite the reluctance of the two men. Sir Michael's attempt to humour her had been a mistake; this young lady was not the sort that you patted on the head and told to run away and play.

Gough now seemed to feel that his professional expertise was impugned. "Now, Miss Sammie, take it from me that murderers who don’t go in for coffins don’t go in for deep graves either. This body lay undiscovered for two hundred years of normal gardening; it took a mechanical excavator to dig deep enough to unearth it. Someone who would take the time to dig a deep grave would most likely have been performing a regular burial."

"No," she said determinedly. "Not in unhallowed ground without a headstone."

I thought it best to change the subject. "I expect you know who owned the Hall at the time, Sir Michael?"

"Oh, yes indeed. In fact my branch of the family inherited the Hall only in the middle of the nineteenth century when the senior line died out. The fourth Lord Kesford was childless, you see, and the title died with him; the estate then passed to the next of kin, who was Sir Richard, the first baronet."

"The one who died at Sebastopol?" I enquired.

"The very same. The baronetcy was his reward for his earlier military service in India. Many of his collection of Indian memorabilia are on display in the old East Wing. Did you notice as you came in that the East Wing wasn’t rebuilt? Some parts date back to the early Tudor manor and even the original abbot’s house. Sir Richard spent enough money to make it weatherproof, but he preferred to live over on this newer side of the house, so he used the East Wing as his museum."

Sir Michael would evidently have been capable of dilating at length on the subject of his own branch of the family, but I was not too interested in what had happened after the murder.

"The third Baron Kesford would have been in occupation two hundred years ago. There's a family tree in the long room, if you’d like to consult it," he said.

"I could show you round the house after lunch," Sammie offered brightly. "I was a guide during last summer vacation when the house was first opened to the public."

Sir Michael did not look pleased, but his voice carried no reservations. "Splendid," he said, "but don't let the Trust people catch you or they'll charge you an entrance fee." He chuckled at his own joke; Gough promptly chuckled too.

"We do so little business in mid-winter that the income barely covers the wages of the staff. By rights we should be closed, like most of the other big houses." He implied that the family felt put upon by the National Trust. Was there another veiled suggestion; perhaps a hint that nosy private eyes were a pain in the butt?

"Of course the restoration work outside isn't finished yet," he said, "so the gardens are not open to the public." Had he not seen enough TV to know that the first thing a detective always did was visit the scene of the crime? He must have noted the look of disappointment on my face. "You can see into the walled garden from the gallery outside the long room," he suggested half-heartedly.

Again he reckoned without Sammie. She wasn't about to ask her uncle's permission.

"But since you're a guest of the family Mr Le Tocq," she grinned conspiratorially at me, "I shall take you into the garden if you promise not to tell the busybodies from the Trust!"

Sir Michael bestowed upon his niece a glance that might have suggested that she was not flavour of the month; indeed it might have suggested that nieces who were themselves guests in the house had no business deciding what other guests in the house could and could not do. However, if he thought this he also thought better of uttering it. His eyes were straying back towards the punchbowl when there was a discreet sound of a gong from the corridor.

"Ah!" he exclaimed with some relief, "Lunch is ready. Sammie, would you be kind enough to show Mr Le Tocq through? Nadia, Charlotte, shall we? Chief Constable, after you."

Sammie took my arm with a grin and led me to the dining room. Had I realised at the time what sort of people her relatives were, I should have been looking about me for a long spoon.

IV - 13:15 Thursday 16th December

"A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work."

The dining room was directly across the corridor. Its centrepiece was a large and highly polished teak table, with napkins and place mats but no tablecloth. The pillar legs of the table were carved into ornate pineapples. The chafing dishes and cutlery were silver, but Victorian art nouveau rather than the more valuable Georgian. An attractive Hepplewhite sideboard, with an anachronistic modern hot plate sitting on top of it, did not match the table.

The carpet was Persian, with an unusual design involving stars, but well worn. A piece seemed to have been cut out of the corner, as though it had been moved here from another, smaller, room. Opposite the sideboard was a large marble fireplace, similar to the one in the drawing room; this one with logs blazing in a wrought iron basket with decorative andirons. At the end of the room a double window with stone mullions looked out on to a lawn, with pathways leading the eye to a verdigris-covered bronze statue in the middle of it.

Sammie followed the direction of my gaze and remarked, "All of the statuary around here is in the worst possible taste; even worse than that dreadful Canova of the Three Graces – do you know the one I mean? It's all nymphs being ravished by satyrs and that kind of thing.

"What can you expect when the young ladies seemed determined to go around with no clothes on?" I heard Charlotte Kerridge's voice from behind me. "I imagine they got ravished rather a lot, poor dears."

Looking over my shoulder, I could see that Mrs Kerridge had her eyes on me again. She still made me feel uneasy. I was not altogether used to ladies discussing nudity and ravishment within a few minutes of our first meeting and I suspected that Mrs Kerridge was doing it deliberately to discomfit me. I was determined not to give her the satisfaction. Marlowe was a man of the world. If women wanted to talk about sex that was fine with him. In the circumstances it was inevitable that I should find myself seated between Sammie and her red haired aunt at lunch.

Now it might be considered that a bachelor, however ineligible, should consider himself fortunate to be flirted with by two attractive women. Marlowe would take it in his stride; just what he would expect after all. I felt more like a bone being fought over by two rival bitches, one bigger and stronger than the other. The objective here however was to wound the other hound rather than to possess the bone. It was clear that there was no love lost between Sammie and Mrs Kerridge. The façade of politeness between them wore very thin as lunch progressed. Sammie was losing on points to her more sophisticated opponent, but gamely kept jumping back into the fray.

My Channel Islands origins had not deprived me of the traditional British sympathy for the underdog (or bitch) and I was certainly attracted to Sammie, but there was no denying that Mrs Kerridge was a fascinating lady. Even when she spoke across me to Sammie the predatory green eyes kept flicking back to me, looking out from under long chestnut lashes; the light behind the eyes still expressive of self confidence but with more than a suggestion of interest.

Sometime between the soup and the main course Mrs Kerridge enquired how I came to be a private detective. "Did you go into it straight from university, Mr Le Tocq?"

"Actually, I was never at university," I admitted.

I had in fact inherited the family hardware store in St. Helier when I was eighteen. I ran it for two years but it bored me, so I jumped at the chance to buy into the agency. It seemed to have more interesting possibilities than selling saucepans and screwdrivers. It was my own choice, though my mother agreed with me.

"And were you disappointed with the results of your career change?" Mrs Kerridge asked archly. If the lady was asking to be impressed, then I was her private eye. I gave her the full Marlowe, carefully remembering to mention that some cases were even life threatening.

Sammie gave me a cheeky smile and obviously wasn't buying the hokum. "I thought real private detectives spent most of their time hiding in bedroom cupboards with cameras, waiting to get the goods on adulterous husbands for divorce cases?"

"And wives," said Mrs Kerridge. "These are the days of equal opportunity, Sammie. Married women are allowed their fun too you know." She regarded me speculatively. Sammie was quick to spot that for once her opponent had dropped her guard. In came the verbal equivalent of a right cross to the solar plexus.

"I suppose when you've been married to someone like Orson for as long as you have," Sammie's voice said she was making a joke, but her look was hostile, "a toy boy might help you feel young again." Ow! That hurt. If ever there was a conversation-stopper that was surely it.

Charlotte Kerridge's expression never even twitched. The tone of her reply contrived to convey both warmth towards me and frostiness towards her niece.

"Take no notice Mr Le Tocq," she said. "My husband's name is Harry. Etonians acquire such dreadful nicknames, don't they? Though no-one knows how Harry came by one that can only be understood by someone with a cockney accent."

I had not, I am ashamed to admit it, got the joke until she explained it; Orson Kerridge. I sympathised; I had inevitably collected the sobriquet of 'Ticker' at school.

"The joke has worn a little thin in twelve years since he left school," Charlotte continued. "Harry is a little older than me, of course."

Now telling the age of females between twenty and forty is notoriously difficult and Mrs Kerridge was a genuine knockout, but I had already placed her on the high rather than the low side of thirty. I on the other hand was a young looking twenty six. I had thought about growing a beard in an attempt to look older for the clients, but Fred had objected that it was easier to put a false beard on than take a real beard off. I wondered why someone who looked as good as Mrs Kerridge would bother to lie about her age for my benefit.

"Harry spends most of his time abroad making money," she was explaining. "I hardly ever see the dear man. I am forced to find my own amusements." This time the look she gave me was hardly subtle. "Unlike Sammie, I can't abide books. You may have noticed my stockings are not blue."

I defy any man not to look when a gorgeous woman says something like that. I shot a quick downwards glance. Her legs were crossed so that her skirt rode up several inches above the knee. They were very shapely legs too and my glance lingered longer than it should have. I looked up again to see Mrs Kerridge smiling knowingly.

Considering the way I had looked at her legs, she was thoughtful. "I can't believe you find it interesting to be a voyeur hiding in cupboards. You strike me as the kind of man who likes to be a more active participant."

I was beginning to wonder what kind of crazy situation I had got myself into. Not even nymphomaniacs usually attempt quite such public pick-ups of casual acquaintances. Fortunately she allowed me to catch my breath.

"Perhaps you could tell me about some of your exciting cases?"

I should have been reluctant to talk any more about myself since that was not going to help with my investigation, but seeing that the lady was still asking to be impressed I described the Spively case without of course mentioning any names. Fred and I had traced a blackmailer who had been extorting money from a certain lady with a past who was married to a multimillionaire. In the process of finding her, (the blackmailer turned out to be a woman,) we had dug up enough dirt to send the blackmailer herself down for a very long stretch.

"So you turned her over to the police?" asked Sammie, trying hard to elbow her way back into the conversation that her aunt was once again monopolising.

"Don't be silly, my dear," rejoined Mrs Kerridge. "That would have embarrassed his client, would it not, Mr Le Tocq? He reversed the blackmail and the case ended in a very satisfactory stalemate. Is that not so?"

I had to agree that indeed it was exactly so. The husband had suspected nothing and Lady Spively had been grateful.

"You must give me your business card, Mr Le Tocq," Mrs Kerridge remarked with amusement. "One never knows when one might need a man like you."

Then the ostensibly innocent but fatal question flashed out with the speed of a cat snagging a mouse. "Are you staying locally?" she asked, eyes locking with mine.

"I haven't fixed up anywhere yet. I drove straight to the Hall from London."

"Why then, you must allow me to offer you hospitality. I have this huge house on the outskirts of Lincoln with no one but myself and two servants whilst Harry's away."

I didn't have that many inhibitions. This lady might be a cat rather than a kitten but she did seem to be inviting me to a feline play time. She had told me twice that her husband was away; she had told me quite clearly that she needed to amuse herself.

"I couldn't possibly impose."

"Oh, it's no trouble at all. You can help me keep boredom at bay in the freezing evening with more tales of derring-do," she said, in exactly the same tone that Lauren Bacall instructed Bogart in the art of whistling. The look that accompanied this suggestion hinted that she had more than tale-telling in mind.

"I have a couple of calls to make after lunch but I'll be in by six o'clock if you could find your way to the house." She was in the act of extracting her card from her bag when Sammie interrupted again, not very graciously.

"You promised me a ride in the MG," she reminded me, "and we're going round the Hall this afternoon."

She seemed disappointed that my helpful assistant had not helpfully booked me a hotel room, but unable to offer any good reason why I should not avail myself of her aunt's offer of hospitality. Then all of a sudden she gave up.

"I have to go back to Cambridge this evening," she said. "But I'll show you where Charlotte lives before I go."

"Excellent!" smiled Mrs Kerridge. "Aperitifs before dinner it is then."

I confessed myself overwhelmed and accepted. Mrs Kerridge's metaphor was not subtle. I wondered whether the aperitif had picked up the implication. A quick glance at Sammie's expression indicated that she had understood perfectly.

V - 14:15 Thursday 16th December

"He looketh forth at the windows, showing himself through the lattice."

Relationships with women are like the tango. No-one tells you the steps; you are just expected to know. Most of the time you are stepping on your partner's feet but she doesn't tell you, so you don't know that you can't actually dance at all. None of my previous relationships had ever threatened to last long enough for me to wear out the girl's shoes.

Nevertheless, I did not find it strange when one woman was attracted to me, so why should I be surprised when two of them appeared attracted to me at once? After all, I was attracted to both of them. Straightforward, superficial sexual attraction; there was nothing at all suspicious about that.

After lunch Mrs Kerridge left on her errands. The green eyes delivered a last come hither look. She gave Sammie a knowing smile and waved slyly as she went through the door. Sammie grimaced and made a soft growling sound deep in her throat that I rather thought I was meant to hear. She did not relax until the Range Rover departed down the drive in a shower of gravel.

Sir Michael and Gough took themselves back to the drawing room to discuss their police business and Lady Nadia had more work to do on her big Millennium party. Sammie and I were left alone. Sammie's humour improved rapidly.

"It is just possible that you may have noticed that my aunt and I do not get on," she confided. "Strictly speaking she should display a health warning in block letters, but I'll deliver it personally if and when you threaten to open the packet. Now, as for the tour," this changing of the subject was accompanied by a beautiful smile, "where would you like to start, house or garden?"

"Rule one for detectives," I replied, "is to start from the scene of the crime. Since in this case however we don't know where the crime was committed, perhaps we should start from where the evidence was concealed, in other words the garden."

Sammie showed me back through the dilapidated corridor by which I had entered, but turned left beneath the steps into a section of the house which had clearly once been the preserve of the domestic staff. In one room a giant board full of bells occupied most of one wall, with each bell labelled for the room to which a servant was being summoned. Sammie tapped a key code into an alarm box just inside the door.

"The bell system tells you quite a bit about below stairs hierarchy," she said, noticing my interest. "Top row was one ring for the butler, two the housekeeper or three for the footmen to one of the main rooms on the first floor; second row for valets and maids required in the principal bedrooms; third row for chambermaids to attend in the guest rooms. More junior staff or outdoor staff would only be spoken to when summoned by one of the senior staff."

"The whole system is redundant now, I suppose?"

"Oh yes. The family rooms are looked after by Juana; the rest are maintained by National Trust staff. There's a cook who lives in the village. They used to have two other domestics but they made them redundant when the Trust arrived."

Like the genteel shabbiness of the corridor and the agreement with the National Trust, the reduction of staff seemed another indication of straitened circumstances. Marlowe would have thought of the other explanation; I didn't.

Sammie was still chatting away happily about the alarm system. "The public aren't allowed into the family areas of the house, but Michael has quite unnecessarily sophisticated devices to ensure that visitors don't trespass by accident. There's an outer ring of sensors between the public area and the reception and dining rooms and an inner ring around his study and the bedrooms. Even I've only been in the study in Michael's company. He never told me the codes for the inner ring."

I confess I found it surprising that she should so readily explain the house's security system to a stranger but at the time it seemed no more peculiar than the rest of my reception at Borminster Hall.

"He's a bit paranoid, don't you think?" She smiled at me. "Nearly all the stuff that's really worth stealing is on display in the public areas of the house. Trying to get from there into the private rooms would be a bit like using Asprey's as a route to get into Pound Stores."

All the rooms through which we were passing had been servants' working areas; kitchens, butler's pantry, boot room, tack room and so on. At one time the establishment must have been very large indeed.

"The staff's sleeping quarters were mostly up in the garrets. The grooms and gardeners slept above the stable block."

"So would there have been servants in this part of the house during the night?" I asked her.

Sammie seemed well versed in the domestic arrangements of the time. "The servants' hours would have been exactly as long as the owners wanted," she replied." The staff that might still be called for sat there in the servants' parlour," she pointed to a doorway, "until the family went to bed or they were given leave to retire for the night."

"Clearly nobody ever told them about the EU Working Hours Directive," I remarked.

Her laugh was a happy sound. "The aristocracy ran the country back then. Nobody had even started regulating the factories, let alone domestic service. Even when they did they drew the line at telling each other not to beat the boot boy or screw the chambermaid."

This remark sounded like retaliation on her Aunt Charlotte. It was a tackle so late that Chopper Harris would have been embarrassed.

"How could the murderer have managed to bury the body in a deep grave without being seen?" I asked. "Even if the servants were in bed, how could he be sure that a chambermaid's casual glance out of a garret window wouldn't have caught him in the act?"

"You mean assuming the chambermaid wasn't being screwed at the time?" Sammie grinned. "Well, you can't actually see into the walled garden from the house, except as Uncle Michael told you from the gallery outside the long room. He would have been unobserved, provided he didn't make too much noise."

"So where was she killed?" I wondered, "Where she was buried, or in the house?" I thought I ought to make clear who the professional around here was. Marlowe was not to be shown the ropes by a slip of a girl.

Sammie shook her head and the tousled hair swung across her back. "In either the house or the garden you'd have to explain why nobody heard the shot." She frowned. A little crease appeared between her eyebrows, disturbing the smoothness of her forehead. "Possibly she was killed somewhere else entirely and the murderers brought the body to the house in a chest for disposal."

"Now that would be crazy! If you've got away with murder, why bring the body to a place where there are a lot of people around and somebody might see you? It's not as though Lincolnshire is densely populated and you couldn't find a quiet spot to lose a corpse." Unfortunately Marlowe now had to display his ignorance. "There was no such thing as a silencer in those days, was there?"

"Quite the reverse," Sammie laughed, "a muzzle loader needed a large black powder charge. You poured it down the barrel, packed it with a wad, rammed the ball on top of that and finished off with another wad. Then you needed priming powder in the pan too, so as to ignite the main charge. It makes a distinctive two part ka-boom. I've seen them test fired in university research. For anyone within half a mile, there's no chance of missing it or of mistaking that sound for anything else, especially in an age with no similar noises; no engines to backfire or anything like that."

"Did the volume of noise depend on the size of the gun?"

"The calibre, yes," she replied. "There was a tiny thing called a muff pistol that ladies travelling in coaches concealed about their person to ward off highwaymen. That just made a sharp crack. At the other extreme you had horse pistols that were too big even for men to carry around, so they kept them in holsters fixed to their saddles. A pistol like that would have about the same bore as a musket and would make a pretty similar noise."

"Might there have been muff pistols in this house?" I asked.

"Absolutely. There are three here today in the exhibition. But you can forget the idea that the sound was too little to be heard. A servant in the garret would still have been able to hear a muff pistol shot from the garden."

"From which we conclude," I said, "that either the house was completely empty …."

"Not probable," she interjected. "The servants were always around to look after the place even if the family were away."

"Or else, the shot was heard but all of those who heard it had a good reason for keeping quiet about it."

"That's my opinion," she confirmed. "Now come and look at the depth of the grave."

She led me out into a small kitchen yard, which gave way to a large herb garden laid out in a neat, formal pattern with beds of different edible and medicinal plants. At the back of the herb garden were the thick stumps of a row of recently felled yews and beyond that a high dry stone wall in which there was no visible gateway. At the time I knew nothing about herbs beyond the fact that they had uses in cooking and traditional medicine and I couldn't have told St John's wort from comfrey.

"Do you know how old the yews were?" I asked. She seemed to follow my train of thought faster than some policemen I could mention.

"Exactly what occurred to me," she grinned. "You're wondering, 'Would they have been big enough two hundred years ago to block the view into the walled garden from the gallery?' Am I right?"

She was right of course. I could see that I was going to have to think faster. I nodded.

"I asked the contractor. He said he was sorry to fell such handsome trees but they'd blocked the light and spoiled the rear elevation of the house. Apparently they weren't in fact that old by tree standards. In 1800 they would have been lower than the garden wall."

"Still, an odd place to plant churchyard yews. Any gardener with foresight would have realised before planting them that they would be a nuisance in a century or so."

By the middle of the nineteenth century there wouldn't have been much that would grow in the walled garden; maybe ferns, grasses and acid-soil plants like Solomon's Seal. If you wanted to discourage gardening that would be one way to do it. On the other hand arboriculture had to be one of the slower methods ever devised for hiding an unofficial grave.

"Don't ask me," laughed Sammie, "I'm a historian, not a botanist. I can barely tell one tree from another. These were planted all around the walled garden. It was a dark and cheerless place when I first came here as a child."

"Was it badly overgrown then?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Not really, but it had hardly any flowers and it was very gloomy. When we were kids, we used to think of it as a spooky place. You could almost sense the ghosts; maybe a real ghost as it turns out. At night it was worse. There was at least one pair of owls that hunted around here, calling to each other all the time."

I had no idea why Sammie would be wandering around a disused garden in the dark, but possibly it was pleasant enough on a warm summer evening. That thought required a considerable stretch of the imagination as we crunched across frozen soil where mud had dropped from tractor wheels on to the pathway.

"When *we* were kids, you said?"

She seemed to recollect those days without relish. "Me and cousin Anthony, Michael's son. He was a bit of a pain, but there was a shortage of alternatives. You’ll probably meet him if you stick around a few days." She gave me the distinct impression that the experience would not be the highlight of my visit. "The whole clan is gathering for the Millennium celebrations. What about you? Are you planning anything?"

I could not get excited about the Millennium, although the media were trying hard to make it seem important. The Dome already looked like a white elephant. Although scaremongers were predicting that the Millennium Bug would cause airliners to drop out of the sky and nuclear power stations to go into meltdown on the first of January, most experts seemed to believe that in fact nothing was going to happen.

"Personally I was intending to go to bed early with a cup of cocoa and a copy of ‘The Big Sleep’" I replied.

She laughed and stopped in her walk towards the entrance to the garden, turning to look at me with an appraising glance. Then she quite casually took both my hands and peered into my eyes as if to search my character.

"Mr Le Tocq," she smiled, "can it be that you lack romance in your soul?"

I can hardly describe the thrill that ran through my body in response to her touch. It was intensely pleasurable, but at the same time uncomfortable. Even through my gloves I could feel it, as though some power was flowing between us. Her eyes said she was not flirting; somehow she was staring not at me but into me. My whole body was saying yes, without any idea of what might be the question.

I think she must have realised the confusion that she had stirred within me because she began talking about more general matters.

"It's a great time to be a historian. So much material is becoming available. Even the exhibitions at the Hall are entering into the spirit of it. You should make a point of looking at the 1800 section, Mr Le Tocq."

With a little smile she dropped my hands and turned away again.

"I know we've only just met," I told her hesitantly as we walked on, "but I’d feel more comfortable if you'd call me Tobias."

"Are you sure that your name is Tobias?" she asked. "Your father wasn’t blind by any chance?" The question came as a shock.

"As a matter of fact," I replied in astonishment, "he did lose his sight in the last few months of his life. Do you mind telling me how you knew that?"

"Oh gosh!" she said in confusion. "I’m so sorry, I didn’t have any idea. I was just being cute and letting you know I knew the origin of the name. Please forgive me."

Before I could even indicate that no offence had been taken she went on, "But old Hebrew names sound a bit formal nowadays, don’t you think? Will you answer to Toby?"

"Oh yes," I conceded with an attempt at gallantry, "provided a pretty girl is asking."

Sammie dropped her eyes. "Thank you, kind sir," she said. "I like good-looking men to call me Sammie."

I liked the sound of that as well as the hint of embarrassment in her voice.

We had arrived at the middle of the west wall of the garden, where a gateway, wide enough to admit the JCB which still sat inside, gave access to a sea of frozen mud.

"You'll have to forgive the mess. Work stopped when the body was found and then the freeze prevented proper tidying up."

We skirted another statue in the centre of the garden; this one may have been the nymph and satyr which Sammie had had in mind earlier. The beast-man had a gargoyle of a face. Something struck me as odd about him. It took me a little while to realise that whereas satyrs were normally depicted with the legs of a goat, this one seemed to have been crossed with a mermaid. The lower half of his body was covered in fish scales and his feet were webbed.

The naked nymph lying in the arms of her captor had eyes empty of expression, strangely trance-like. This sort of composition normally depicts panic on the face of the victim, but this particular victim might have been asleep. The sculptor had perhaps intended to convey that she had fainted. In other respects he had gone to town on the realism. The weathering of the stone could not disguise the careful detail, especially in areas of the body where regency sculpture has a habit of developing discreet vagueness. Well brought up nineteenth century ladies would probably have had the vapours on seeing it.

The excavation was about a dozen yards from the statue, in a direct line towards the south wall of the garden. The pit was a good six feet deep.

"It's for new drains. Opening to the public requires modern toilet facilities; they're being built in the servants quarters. You can see that that this amount of digging would have taken one man hours; too long for a secretive burial. So I reckon there were at least two men; strong men at that, used to hard work."

"Gardeners perhaps?" I asked unwillingly.

"Some of the family were pretty tough men themselves," Sammie replied. "Soldiers; a few Turnip Townshend types who look from their portraits as though they didn't mind putting their shoulders to the cartwheel. Don’t rule them out just because they were aristocrats."

"That's good. They'll be documented. The gardeners won't have much history."

"If we're lucky the estate records will have survived. For example, we know that the area of the grave was a flower bed before the yews grew tall enough to block the light."

That probably ruled out the flowering seasons as the time of year that the murder was committed. It would have had to be midwinter, since gardeners in private service would have been under a lot of pressure to maintain a display of attractive blooms for as long as possible, as well as providing cut flowers for the house.

"Is this where we're likely to find the trail going cold?" I asked her, echoing Fred's forebodings. "Can circumstantial evidence of this sort lead us to the killers after all this lapse of time?"

"Goodness, Toby, you would make a dreadful historian," she scolded. "How do you suppose anyone ever tackled the murders of the Princes in the Tower or discovering the identity of Jack the Ripper?"

Fortunately these were just the questions that I had asked myself and in any case Marlowe was not in favour of allowing broads to treat him as a dumb ass, no matter how much electricity they generated.

"There are only three serious suspects for the Princes in the Tower," I responded, "and as it happens I've read remarkably convincing arguments in favour of all of them. There are at least six candidates for Jack the Ripper. Personally I'm inclined to suspect Conan Doyle's American friend, but the case wouldn't stand up in a court of law."

"Well," she said appraisingly, placing her hands on her hips, "so I'm suitably impressed. But we're not going to a court of law. Historians look for the balance of probability rather than proof beyond all reasonable doubt. Look, the truth is that one of us round here needs a good thesis for her *D Phil* and you could write an absolutely brilliant thesis by cracking this particular mystery."

"So you rather fancy being Doctor Chalmers?" I smiled.

"I do," she said, "What's wrong with that?" She banged her gloved hands together to restore the circulation and looked at me again in that appraising way of hers. "But we can still tackle this investigation together. A historian and a gumshoe should make a pretty good team. I'll supply the historical knowledge and you can supply the criminal forensics." Her infectious grin dissolved whatever scruples I might have had about claiming any such knowledge. "Of course when I write up the thesis, naturally I'll take all the credit. What do you say?"

"I say, if you get all the credit, what do I get?" I replied cheerfully.

She smiled attractively. "Oh I don't know. I'm sure we can think of something."

The prospect was not at all displeasing. For one thing the investigation looked beyond my limited historical skills. There was more to the investigation of ancient crimes than I had supposed and Sammie had been able to supply details from memory much faster than I could have looked them up. For another thing she was extremely attractive and, unless I was much mistaken, displaying, like her aunt, a flattering interest in me. Even if we couldn't solve the crime together, the company would compensate amply for the failure.

"So what would a historian do now, Holmes?" I enquired.

"Elementary, my dear Watson," she replied. Her next remark was so audacious that it took my frozen breath away. "We borrow the skull from the skeleton and whisk it off to Cambridge. I happen to have a good friend studying pathology. I was talking to her about this just yesterday actually. She'll tell us an accurate date of death and she'll also tell us what the victim looked like."

I was astonished by the aplomb with which she proposed body snatching. It wasn't that I had scruples about the integrity of the corpse. At the time I tended to assume that folk who'd been dead two hundred years probably didn't give a monkey's about the fate of their bones or indeed anything else. No, it just seemed a bit macabre to propose collaboration to someone you had known for less than a couple of hours and then quite casually remark that the sort of collaboration you had in mind was not so much Holmes and Watson as Burke and Hare.

"Will the authorities not mind us borrowing the skull?"

"Who's to refuse?" she shrugged. "The skeleton is down in the lumber room. In a real coffin this time; Uncle Michael having philanthropically paid for one. There's going to be a re-interment at St Winifred's in Borminster next Tuesday. I doubt if anyone will even look at it again before then. I’ll have the skull back before anyone knows it’s gone."

I have known professional detectives with less resourcefulness. "And you think dating the skull will help us to identify the relevant records of births?" I asked, trying to sound as though grand larceny (cranium) was all in a day’s work for me.

"Easier than that," she glanced around as if to confirm that there was no-one watching us. "Promise me you can keep a secret. I don't want this to get out before I'm ready, or I can kiss goodbye to the research grant."

Marlowe and Watson were both baffled, so I nodded.

"This skeleton is definitely is a member of the family," she confided, smiling.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

She gave me a triumphant look. "The necklace of course!" she exclaimed.

"The crucifix that you mentioned earlier?" I asked. "Is it a family heirloom?"

"You bet it is," she grinned. "The Chief Constable brought it back to Uncle Michael this morning and it was passed around in the drawing room. I thought I recognised it as soon as I saw it, but I didn't let on. Instead I sneaked off and checked it quietly. Lady Anne Kesford is actually wearing it in the George Romney portrait of her in the library!"

"Are you sure?" I asked.

She nodded excitedly, but to me it seemed disappointing news. The investigative partnership of Chalmers and Le Tocq seemed doomed to be of very short duration and I had just been coming round to the view that I should like it to go on longer. "In that case you appear to have solved the question of the victim's identity," I said.

"No, no, no," she pouted. "Gosh Toby you're supposed to be a detective." I felt suitably chastened, though I didn't quite know what I was supposed to be ashamed of. "Lady Anne is at least forty in the picture," she told me, smiling impishly, "and it was painted in the eighteenth century."

She gave me a quick hug with her left arm as if to share her delight. Her touch immediately revived my spirits. I reckoned I had an excuse for not knowing the dates when George Romney was active as a painter.

"But heirlooms like the necklace would have been passed on from mother to daughter," I said. "So the victim was most probably a granddaughter or some other close relative? If we're lucky we can identify the main candidates from the family tree. But why should a member of the family be buried unceremoniously in the garden?"

"Well she could hardly be laid in the family vault with a bullet in her head. Who would they blame?" Sammie demanded, placing her arms akimbo on her hips and adopting a challenging expression.

"If we're going to pin the rap on the family we need means, motive and opportunity," I said, quoting Marlowe. "Means and opportunity shouldn't be too difficult, but there's no immediately obvious motive for the family either to commit the crime or to conceal it. They would have been more likely to set up a hue and cry." Then I thought about the gardener and his rose fertiliser and I added, "Assuming they knew what had happened of course."

"Well I don't really think it could have been kept from them," she replied. "Village communities just aren't like that and in those days everyone round here would have known everyone else's business. Someone would have talked. Ladies of quality just did not get themselves shot and buried in secret."

"On the other hand they did disappear every now and again; like elopements," I suggested.

"But in that case the family would know where she'd gone, they'd just not be telling. In fact if the family had a motive, an elopement story might have been one means to conceal that the girl was dead. Girls who eloped were likely to be disowned. For all practical purposes they ceased to exist and anyone enquiring locally would have met a stony silence from the family. You know," she explained, "a touch of the 'I have no daughter' syndrome." Sammie produced the perfect parody of the famous Victorian moral illustration; one hand over her eyes and the other arm thrust out behind her back. I had to laugh.

"Do you know you could almost get away with that today," she continued. "Say for example you were to invite me to dinner in the George at Borminster village." There followed a meaningful look. "The George is a place where I am known and you are not. Then suppose the next day we were both missing and my very recognisable car was found in, say Harwich. Do you think Uncle Michael would be suspected of bumping me off? Do you think Gough would insist on digging up the garden again?"

Now I was no more superstitious than the next man, but Sammie's imaginary scenario of our demise was a little too realistic and I needed some wood to touch. I tried to laugh it off. "I suppose that means I can't take you to dinner for fear that we're both murdered?"

"In the interests of furthering our partnership I'd take the risk," she smiled again, "but sadly not tonight because I'm off to Cambridge whilst you're dining with the dragon lady. My commiserations. I have her picture on the wall of my bed-sit in college," she said, with that growl in her voice again, "so I can practise throwing darts at it. I'm getting good. I can stick her in the eye at ten paces."

"What brought this about? Were you never close?"

Sammie sighed. "It depends what you mean by close. I lived with her during the holidays for seven years until I went up to Cambridge. My parents died when I was eleven. There was a fire at home whilst I was away at boarding school; neither of them got out." Sammie's hesitation was only momentary. "Uncle Michael was a widower at the time so Charlotte took me in. The relationship went downhill from there."

"That sounds rather ungrateful." I couldn't imagine that she would have taken against her hospitable aunt for no reason.

"Charlotte gave me a lot to be ungrateful for," she said curtly. "I know I said I'd give you the health warning, but if you don't mind I'd rather not talk about it. Just watch yourself whilst you're there, that's all. There's a great deal more to that lady than meets the eye." She looked at me and sighed again. "Yes, yes, I know that what meets the eye is also very easy on it. She can twist most men around her little finger."

"When I last checked my brain was still located above the waist," I protested.

"So you'll probably survive. Just be careful, that's all."

I said nothing. There was nothing to say.

We were finished with the scene of the crime. I wanted to see the necklace and the family tree and we were both in danger of freezing to death. I cast a last glance at the statue and for some reason I shuddered. Sammie took it for a sign of cold. She swung her arms around and slapped her hands together again, stamping a little tattoo on the frozen earth as she did so. Then she slipped an arm though mine as we walked back to the house. That felt very good.

The family tree in the long room revealed six female descendants of Lady Anne Kesford born between 1760 and 1800, with four more to be considered if we allowed another ten years either side. One of these, Lady Isobel Rigg, could be ruled out immediately since she had lived to 1850 and was the last of the Kesford line when her junior cousins, the Delabors, had inherited the estate but not the title. Although she had borne a daughter, Victoria Kerr, the girl had apparently died young.

Of the remaining nine possibles, four, according to the records, had remained unmarried. These seemed the most likely candidates. All except one of the other five had borne children and the husband of the childless one was known by Sammie as a politician who had served in the Duke of Wellington's administration at the end of the 1820's. Children and prominent husbands made a quiet disappearance unlikely.

No dates of death were shown for any of the four promising names. Two however were the subjects of adult portraits in the long room and one more had been painted as a child by Sir Joshua Reynolds, though like many of the master's works it was much faded. It seemed we had three chances out of four that we actually had a likeness of the victim. What was more in three cases their births were so far apart that an accurate dating of the skull would give a likely identity.

"It's a pity none of them is wearing the necklace in their portraits," I said.

"Surely you don’t like your cases that easy; there would be no challenge in them!" Sammie exclaimed. "Now whilst I get the forensic tests done on the skull, your job is to find out all you can about the local scene around the turn of the eighteenth century. If we can establish the circumstances as well as identify the victim, we’ll be half way to finding a motive for the killing."

"Are you sure you want to be an academic?" I asked. "I can think of a private detective agency that might be able to use someone like you."

"Partner, huh?" she asked.

"Well, you might work your way up. I was thinking that you might start from tea lady."

"Ooh!" said Sammie, making as if to beat her fists on my chest. "For that you definitely owe me dinner when I get back." She wagged her finger like a schoolmistress delivering a lecture to a dim pupil. "Now tomorrow first thing you go and see Mrs Pressley in Borminster village library. The library is a part time affair, only open in the mornings, but there is nothing about Borminster that Mrs Pressley does not know. She's president and most of the membership of the local history society. But what's important is that she has an exercise book full of her research into the area. If you ask her very nicely she will lend it to you. She lent it to me years ago, but I was too much into national history at the time to pay much attention to the parochial stuff, more's the pity."

"There'll be a guide book to the Hall itself, with an account of its history?"

"Three pounds fifty for the glossy version or we could steal one from Uncle Michael."

I decided that this young lady's penchant for petty larceny could easily get out of hand. We would have enough trouble with the skull. "We shouldn't go in for crime for crime's sake," I said. "My holiday budget will stand three pounds fifty."

"You worry too much," Sammie reprimanded and then added, "Got a plastic bag?" I had to confess that I did not make a habit of concealing such items about my person. "Never mind," she said, incorrigibly, "I'll steal one from the kitchen. Follow me."

As Sammie had predicted, our piece of thievery went without a hitch. I kept a nervous watch in the corridor outside the lumber room whilst she slipped inside and seconds later emerged with a weighted carrier bag and that infectious grin on her face.

"I knew the coffin wasn't screwed down, because Uncle Michael told me he wanted to put the necklace back in it before the re-interment. Touching isn't it?" she said, tapping the side of her nose knowingly. "Re-interring the lady with her jewellery I mean. The thing is pure gold after all. Do you suppose he'll extend his alarm system to the churchyard in case any of the local ne'er-dowells think they might just try digging for gold in them thar hills?"

It wasn't touching, it was bizarre. Sir Michael had quite a number of uses for an extra few quid. Unless there was some Lincolnshire equivalent of Tutenkhamun's curse to be feared I could think of no good reason for re-burying a valuable gold necklace with a two hundred year old corpse. Of course it would be a good way of disposing permanently of one of the few shreds of evidence to the identification of the body. But why should he wish to prevent identification?

"It will be less touching if Sir Michael decides to put the necklace back in the coffin before you've returned the skull," I said.

"I took care of that," Sammie replied. "I offered to put the necklace in the coffin for him. I've got it in my bag."

"On second thoughts," I volunteered with some admiration, "perhaps we could start you a little higher than tea lady."

"Right now," she grinned, "you can be promoted to getaway driver. You can follow me to Lincoln and I'll show you where Charlotte lives. We'll be early, so I'll dump the Mini and you can take me for a spin in your MG. Is that fair enough?"

I did as I was told.

VI - 18:15 Thursday 16th December

"Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet and thy speech is comely."

By the time that Sammie departed for Cambridge, her arm waving cheerily from the open driver's window of the Mini, I had decided that, whatever the outcome of our joint investigation, my eccentric holiday would certainly not be a waste of time. I judged Sammie to be a little vulnerable, though she had none of that brittle charm that you sometimes find in orphans; at once anxious to be liked but also afraid to let you too close for fear of being hurt again. This young lady had her head screwed on very firmly. Before she left, she warned me again to be on my guard around Charlotte.

"Just think," she said, "how many invitations to stay you have previously had from rich ladies whose husbands happen to be away on business?" I did. Unfortunately one came to mind. "Oh, well," said Sammie, "maybe I withdraw the question. But Aunt Charlotte is not your typical lonely over-sexed middle-aged female. That is a seriously weird lady. Make sure you stay out of her bedroom - and not just for the reason you think."

This was the second time she had overtly suggested that Charlotte was a sexual predator. I didn't understand why she would bother. What was it to her if her aunt fancied a casual affair, with me or anyone else? Sammie and I had only just met and although Marlowe might flatter himself with the immediacy of his favourable impact upon women, I usually reckoned that it would take a little longer before any suggestion of jealousy could plausibly be suspected.

"I don't make a habit of entering ladies' bedrooms uninvited," I said. I might have added that when in them I had never yet found myself in any danger, but Sammie already looked annoyed. She seemed to consider a further warning, but then thought better of it.

"I won't wait in Cambridge for the forensic tests on the skull. I'll be back by late afternoon tomorrow. Can I trust you to look after yourself until then?"

The implication was that in default of my looking out for myself, she would have to do it for me. Before she departed she took hold of both my hands again, as she had done in the garden. She looked me straight in the eyes for a long, hypnotic moment. A cold breeze flicked the blonde hair across he face. As she reached up to brush it away she let the hand continue until it arrived behind my neck and gently drew my head down to her level. Her lips brushed my cheek. She smiled with just a touch of nervousness and then turned away and opened the car door.

Mrs Kerridge was at home but busy when I arrived at the elegant Georgian house that stood in an acre of its own grounds on the outskirts of Lincoln. A butler took my bag and conducted me to a guest room on the first floor, where I washed and changed. When I descended again to the hall a short while later, he showed me into the library and offered me a drink, which I declined and the local paper, which I accepted.

The butler was a classic caricature: hear no evil; see no evil and keep your mouth firmly shut about any evil that sneaks into your ken despite yourself. However he would never have got the butler's part in a movie, because of his remarkable appearance. He might, on the other hand, have been a shoo-in for the part of Dracula, give or take a couple of false fangs. Black hair combed straight back above a gaunt, pallid face, with thin pointed eyebrows and dark red lips. In a library at six o'clock my constitution could stand it, even after a day aiding and abetting body-snatching, (well, all right, skull snatching.) In a graveyard at midnight something told me Sir John Falstaff and I might have seen eye to eye about the relative merits of valour and discretion.

I was left alone with the local paper, which, as was only natural, was still raking over the story of the Borminster Hall body to see if more column inches could yet be extracted from an item which had been a one day wonder in the nationals. The intrepid local newshound had established, as I had, that the murder had probably taken place whilst George, Third Baron Kesford, had occupied the family seat. The paper published a reproduction of an oil painting of the said George which hung in the county museum.

There was a striking contrast with the picture which hung in the long room at Borminster Hall. That George was florid, white wigged, elderly man, tending to fat and looking less than comfortable in military full dress. This one was a young, slim and athletic George, in shirtsleeves and breeches, carrying a musket and with his foot on the head of a prostrate stag. His dark hair was tied back in a queue but his saturnine good looks would easily have distracted modern ladies' attention from his hairstyle. Even in the imperfect newspaper photograph, the eyes staring from the printed page insisted that this was a man not to be taken lightly.

The hack could not place the musket in George's hand at the scene of the crime of course. The article explained that George was a noted marksman, who in his youth had undertaken numerous hunting expeditions in Europe and further afield. After succeeding his father to the title in 1790, he had joined the army some years into the war and had served in the Peninsular Campaign with distinction around 1810.

Leaving the army whilst the war was still in progress, he had retired to Borminster Hall where he became a recluse, taking no part in public life and rarely being seen even by his tenants.

It was said that his wife was seen even less frequently and rumours circulated locally that she had become deranged. I looked back at the picture to confirm that Lord George`s family name had indeed been Rigg, not Rochester. The young Miss Bronte had lived only in the next county and it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that she had drawn inspiration from Borminster. Had Sammie not recognised the necklace, might I not now be seeking a disappearing governess by the name of Jane Eyre?

With a little chuckle I returned my attention to the paper and finished the article. The fourth baron, the son of George and Lady Kesford, had never married and with his death and those of Lady

Isobel and her daughter in India the senior family line had died out. It was carefully explained that the present occupants of the Hall descended from a junior branch of the family.

On an impulse I decided to ring the paper and see if anyone was still there at this hour who could arrange for me to meet the reporter. I walked across the library to the extension phone which sat on an exquisite Sheraton bureau beside the rows of bookshelves. After years of practice I picked up the phone delicately, so as not to offend Mrs Kerridge if she were using another extension. When I did indeed hear her voice on the line, I almost put the phone down again; almost, but not quite. Her words, distinct, loud and angry, arrested the receiver's descent towards its cradle. I held it, as quietly as I could, to my ear.

"And I say, Michael, that Tobias is different. He’s not a reporter. He’s not awake, thank the stars, but he has to be taken seriously. He won't give up without some kind of answer. If he's going to be digging anyway, I want him digging under my nose where I can keep an eye on him." Mrs Kerridge seemed to have a neat line in mixed metaphors. Somehow I was not flattered by being portrayed as a somnambulant archaeologist. Marlowe regarded that as a slur on his professional competence.

"Charlotte, that is dangerous." The baronet’s voice lacked confidence, where his sister’s did not. "Tobias is a threat."

I was mystified. They were using my first name as though I was an old friend but at the same time they seemed afraid of me. So far as I was aware I was no kind of threat to either of them and the only kind of answer that I was seeking was an answer to my idle curiosity.

"Nonsense!" Mrs Kerridge exclaimed. "We agreed that it would arouse less suspicion to appear helpful. I'm just going to be especially helpful." The tone of the last two words left her meaning unmistakable.

"He seemed rather taken with Sammie," came the hesitant reply. "It would be a nuisance if they became close."

"They won't," Mrs Kerridge’s voice was emphatic. "Don't worry; the little bitch is not in my league. By tomorrow he'll have forgotten he even met her." The line was not perfect, but I was pretty sure at the time that ‘bitch’ was the word she used. It seemed an unpleasant way for an aunt to refer to her niece. Within a few days I had cause to wonder whether I might not have misheard her.

"Very well, Charlotte," Sir Michael concluded. "I'll rely on you."

"You always do," she replied. "Have I ever let you down?"

The conversation ended and I waited until I heard Mrs Kerridge put down her receiver before replacing mine. The mystery was growing. First Michael, who was not well enough off to keep his home private, wanted to inter a valuable necklace along with the skeleton; now both Michael and Charlotte were apparently engaged in a conspiracy to avoid the truth coming out about a two hundred year old crime.

This did not make sense. Who could it possibly hurt now? What if Sammie and I successfully identified the victim as one of Lady Anne's granddaughters and what if it proved possible to show that Lord George, say, had been the likely killer? What did it matter? I was brought up to believe that all noble families were descended from gangsters anyway. The fact that this particular piece of gangsterism had been slightly more recent than most could not possibly be of relevance to their indirect descendants eight generations later. They could even use it as a tourist attraction.

I heard movement outside the library and stepped away from the phone to the bookshelves, where I pulled out a book at random and pretended to scan the pages. Mrs Kerridge swept into the room. To say that she looked stunning would be the understatement of the decade. Her after lunch appointments could easily have been with her hairdresser and beauty parlour; not that a lot of improvement had seemed possible from her appearance at lunch time.

Although, so far as I knew, I was the only guest, she had dressed for dinner. The evening gown was unmistakably Dior; a figure hugging and low cut black sheath that ended just above the knee and had an unnecessary but inviting slit up the left side of the skirt showing a long flash of silken thigh as she walked. She wore plain gold jewellery; a twisted strand around the neck and a similar bracelet on her left wrist. A small diamond pendant glistened at each ear, beneath a pile of chestnut curls drawn up on top of her head.

"Mr Le Tocq, my apologies," she said contritely. "Whatever must you think of me? I had this useless builder on the phone who simply will not understand that my conservatory roof must be fixed before I have family visitors over the New Year period. The infuriating man requires to be given every instruction four or five times."

"You can't get the help these days," I suggested.

"That," she said, "is supposed to be my line, I think, but I forgive you."

She noticed the book that I was holding and her composure twitched momentarily. "Are you interested in witchcraft?" she asked. I looked down and saw that I was holding a volume entitled 'Black Magic and Witchcraft in Rural England 1550-1650.'

"Actually I was wondering why a lady who can't abide books has such an impressive collection," I said, "and such unusual titles."

She glided across the room towards me and took the book from my hand. Opening the fly leaf she showed me the name 'Archibald Delabor' written inside. There was a suspicion of a wink. "My father," she indicated. "His will stated that his personal library was to be divided amongst his three children, though God knows why he included me. Frances was the scholar. Michael was good with money but nothing much else. And me..." she smiled beautifully, "I spent all my time chasing boys."

"That I do not believe," I said gallantly. "I am sure that all the boys chased you."

Now that’s the sort of thing you think you remember Ronald Coleman saying in ‘The Prisoner of Zenda.’ I've said she made me feel uneasy; a sort of cross between meeting Kim Basinger and meeting a female high court judge. If she was intending to be especially helpful then I was clearly going to be putty in her hands.

"Perhaps, but I didn’t let them all catch me." She responded to my gauche compliment with a suggestive look and smiled again, more seductively this time. She handed the book back to me and taking my arm guided me to a chair.

"I can’t believe that Perkins left you without a drink," she tutted. She had the confidence of a beautiful woman quite accustomed to making a big impression on males. If she really thought that I was somehow different then she gave no sign of it.

"After all that negotiating with the builder," she laughed, "I am dying for a G and T. Will you join me?"

I accepted a whisky and ginger ale.

"Horse's neck," she laughed. "Are you a rider?"

"More of a charioteer," I quipped. I had no idea where the incongruous thought had come from. I was so disconcerted by my alluring hostess that I was talking nonsense just for the sake of something to say. "I mean the only horses I know about are under the bonnet of vintage cars," I covered myself quickly. "I restored the MG myself."

My hostess expressed interest. She seated me opposite her. We occupied two plush overstuffed armchairs before the open doors of a glowing *Baxi* fire. Mrs Kerridge sat on the front of her chair and leaned forward towards me to hear more. She was perfectly aware that in the process she exposed her décolletage. The whisky warmed my inside, the fire warmed my outside and the flickering light reflected from her bosom accentuated the shadow of her cleavage. I felt a quickening of the pulse and a stirring of less than platonic interest.

Mrs Kerridge paused a moment, putting down her drink and placing both hands on her knees. When I didn't go on she ducked forward even lower and demanded with a laugh, "Well, don't keep me in suspense, do you or don't you?" If she had been asking me whether she was wearing a bra under the evening dress, I would by this time have been able to give a confident answer in the negative. It was not at all easy to keep my mind focused on the ostensible topic of conversation.

I cleared my throat to allow me time to recover a calm tone of voice. "I'm not sure quite what you mean," I fumbled.

"Do you or don't you find that it pulls the girls of course?" she declared.

"I see. Well, yes and no. Girls of my own age are rarely too impressed." I deliberately didn't mention the recent exception. "Ladies of more mature tastes are always asking to be taken out in it."

"How very shocking!" Mrs Kerridge laughed again. Was the laugh just a trifle forced?

At that moment a black cat which had lurked unnoticed beside the fire sprang into her lap. "Fisto!" she said, "get down now, you'll spoil my dress." The cat reluctantly allowed itself to be put back on the floor and returned to the hearth.

The cat’s intervention allowed me to get the conversation off the topic of myself and my car. I said ‘What a nice cat,’ as you do and like any pet owner she replied in the same vein.

"Do you like cats, Mr. Le Tocq?" she enquired, picking up her drink again from the small table between our chairs.

"I can't say I have that much to do with them."

"It’s a symbiotic relationship that cats have with humans," she said. "Unlike dogs, they never acknowledge inferiority. People say they can't be trained, you know. They're wrong of course. It all depends on what you want to train them to do."

Mrs Kerridge looked remarkably feline herself. Her lissom figure began to curl in the armchair, with feet drawn up off the ground and the green eyes had that steady gaze of the expert mouser biding her time. "Fisto!" she called, "Go and say hello to Mr Le Tocq."

The cat rose from the hearth and paced towards me earnestly. At a distance of about one foot it stopped and regarded me with baleful eyes. I assumed I should respond by stroking him, but the cat instantly arched his back and yowled as I stretched out my hand. I withdrew the hand smartly.

"Fisto!" said Mrs Kerridge sharply, "That is not polite. Apologise to Mr. Le Tocq." The cat moved forward and rubbed itself against my leg before retreating again to the hearth. "You see," Mrs Kerridge continued, "Not difficult to train really."

I had never before seen a cat respond to any vocal instruction; unless you count the fact that the old Tom in the office would get off my desk if I yelled at him. But then, he had learned that the yell would be followed by whatever missile came to hand and at the best velocity I could manage. Maybe that’s how Fred got the habit of throwing things in the office too.

Mrs Kerridge’s cat however appeared to have a considerable familiarity with the English language. Familiar. That word stirred the hairs on the back of my neck. Probably association of ideas from the title of the book which I had inadvertently picked up.

"Your cat has a very unusual name," I remarked.

"It’s just his pet name," she smiled. "His full name is too long to be calling out all the time." She didn't volunteer the extended version of the name, but it didn't take a genius at crossword puzzles to work it out.

"Mephistopheles?" I asked. Mrs Kerridge smiled again. "Because he gets up to a lot of devilment?"

Mrs Kerridge's gaze was unsettling. "You must tell me what you’ve been up to since lunch," she said, reverting to the subject of myself after too brief an interlude. "Did Sammie keep you entertained?"

It was pretty clear from her tone that Mrs Kerridge had little opinion of her niece’s powers of entertainment. I was meant to be impressed by the contrast.

"We toured the house and garden." I had very little that I could actually admit to. I wasn't going to talk about the skull heist and the identification of the necklace.

"Any closer to identifying the body?"

"Not really." I lied with my best poker face on; not at all easy in the circumstances.

"And Sammie's off back to Cambridge now?"

I felt that I ought to find an explanation which would cover Sammie's departure and a precipitate return without arousing suspicion. "Ah, yes, I believe she has a date with a large and dishy rowing man from Fitzwilliam College."

"Really!" Mrs Kerridge exclaimed. "That’s most unlike Sammie. Her idea of a date is usually a cosy studying session in the college library, with two hourly breaks for cocoa. She is, I’m afraid, despite being quite a pretty girl, one of nature's spinsters. Did she tell you that she lived with me after her parents died?"

She did not wait for a reply. "You know, in all those years the girl had never had a boyfriend. For goodness sake, she never even brought a friend home from school for the holidays. She used to sit in her room with her books and her computer like some modern day hermit. That sort of thing is not healthy in a young girl, do you not agree?"

I agreed. Mrs Kerridge seemed pleased.

She collected a plate of savouries from a side table and when she brought it back to offer to me she sat on the arm of my chair, crossing her right leg over her left. The slit in the skirt divided neatly to the upper and lower sides of the chair arm, leaving most of her right leg exposed. Her stockings were still not blue, but they were stockings not tights. A tantalising inch of bare skin showed above them.

Mrs Kerridge affected not to notice and directed my attention to the plate that she held in her left hand. Her right, still holding her drink, was extended behind me across the back of my chair. There was no further reference to Sammie, or to the body at Borminster Hall.

Her seduction technique was not perhaps as blatant as my account may make it sound, but she did not believe in wasting time. One could not mistake her meaning, but neither could one be offended unless one happened to be of a strict puritan persuasion. Even though I had heard Mrs Kerridge explaining to Sir Michael what she planned to do I could not help responding to the come-on signals. I wondered whether 'Orson' knew how his wife behaved when he was away, but never having met him I felt no particular obligations towards him. By the time a discreet knock on the door heralded the arrival of the vampire-like butler, Mrs Kerridge and I had become quite well acquainted.

She led me through to the dining room, which contained enough Chippendale to persuade me that whatever the state of their marriage, the Kerridges' bank balance was not as strapped as the Delabors'. It was real Chippendale not reproduction. You can tell the new stuff because modern mahogany is not naturally dark and has to be stained. Also it has not had time to develop the patina of use. We sat very formally at opposite ends of the dining table, whilst dinner was served by Perkins and a tall, dark haired woman in her mid thirties who turned out to be his wife.

The main course was beef Bourguignon which had been marinated in something discernibly superior to your average cooking burgundy. The table wine was Mouton Rothschild '89; not Cadet, this was the real stuff. One bottle of it would have bought several cases of the Chateauneuf du Pape which was the upmarket offering of my local wine shop, but Mrs Kerridge insisted on opening a second bottle as the meal progressed. It could not of course be wasted and it would have been a mortal sin to re-cork it. There are far less pleasant ways of becoming intoxicated.

Back in the Library afterwards with an Armagnac and a large Havana I was thinking that it would be a pity to upset Mrs Kerridge by finding out the secret that she would go to such extremely acceptable lengths to conceal. She was sitting on the hearth rug, a glass in her left hand, her right hand idly stroking the cat. Though ostensibly chosen to warm herself before the fire, her position at a lower level than my chair provided further evidence of the shapely bosom only half concealed by the low cut neckline of her dress. The gold choker gleamed in the firelight.

Her voice echoed Fisto's purring. "Come and sit on the rug," she said. "It's freezing outside again tonight." She patted the hearth rug immediately beside her.

The anticipation was pleasurable. The execution was less than gallant because I was not as steady on my feet as I would have liked. I managed to arrive on the rug without actually falling over. Since I'd commenced the manoeuvre by kneeling down and then adjusted my weight sideways away from Mrs Kerridge, the two of us were separated by our drawn up legs. Mrs Kerridge stretched out and leaned on her right elbow with her head towards the fire. With her left hand she swirled the Armagnac in her glass reflectively.

The cat moved closer to the hearth, its eyes fixed on me. Mrs Kerridge took a sip of Armagnac and regarded me over the rim of her glass. The firelight gleamed red in her eyes. Why on earth should I remember Moloch again at such a time? Her hair shone like burnished copper, more lustrous than the gold about her neck. Her gaze was steady; she had seen nothing to shake her confidence in her own spellbinding beauty. I no longer had any thought but her. I was drawn to her by an irresistible magnetism. She knew it.

"You can't possibly be comfortable in that jacket," she said softly.

I was in the act of removing the offending garment when the mood in the room changed more suddenly than when the Lady of Shallot's mirror broke. With a sharp exclamation Mrs Kerridge sat bolt upright, dropped her glass and clapped the hand to her left eye. Armagnac spilled over the rug and over the skirt of her dress, but she hardly seemed to notice. I twisted rapidly on to my knees again beside her and steadied her swaying body with a hand on each shoulder.

"What's the matter?" I exclaimed. "Can I help?"

Mrs Kerridge winced with the effort of having to reply. As I helped her slowly to her feet the cat slunk away to the corner of the room and yowled as though it shared its mistress's pain.

"It's nothing," Mrs Kerridge hissed through gritted teeth.

"Every now and again I get this sudden pain in my eye. It's nothing. Don't worry. It takes about half an hour for it to go away. I'm sorry I must go and lie down. Perkins will show you to your room."

With her hand still over her eye, she made her way to the door, pressing a bell push with her left hand as she went out. I heard a muffled conversation in the hallway and then Perkins entered the Library.

"Can I offer you coffee, sir, or perhaps another Armagnac?"

I declined, still disturbed by Mrs Kerridge's abrupt departure. "Should we send for a doctor?" I asked.

"Madam has seen several doctors about this problem, sir. There is apparently nothing physically wrong. To be honest, sir," he confided knowingly, "Madam should probably wear glasses and she won't. It will pass, sir; it always does." Perkins was all calm reassurance. The poor man couldn't help it that his appearance did not invite trust.

Declaring my intention to retire for the night, I allowed my somewhat unsteady steps to be directed upstairs towards the guest room, gradually adjusting to the fact that I was going to be saved from temptation in spite of myself. The shock had for the moment driven away thoughts of sleep, so before leaving the library I picked up again the book on rural witchcraft, my earlier perusal of which had seemed to disturb my hostess.

Perkins saw me safely to my bedroom. "Will there be anything more, sir?" he asked.

I shook my head. I immediately realised that was a mistake, since the connection between my head and my body was insufficiently stable for such exercise. I grunted a negative.

"Then good night, sir," said Perkins. "Breakfast will be available in the morning room at any time you wish, sir. Mrs Kerridge rarely breakfasts before nine." I supposed that Perkins would appreciate it if I didn't breakfast before nine either. I remembered what Sammie had said about the hours put in by domestic servants.

I got myself ready for bed and by the time I had crawled into it I was feeling steadier, if not sober. The image of Mrs Kerridge stretched out on the hearth rug was still printed on my brain and I was far too aroused to sleep, but sufficiently restored to my normal self to be disinclined to present myself at the lady's bedroom to offer my solicitude in person. I knew perfectly well what power Mrs Kerridge exercised over me and it was not witchcraft. Nevertheless Marlowe did not take unfair advantage of women. There would, I was confident, be another time.

It was a poor substitute, but with a sigh I referred to the index of the book to see if there was any reference to Borminster. There was not; however a whole chapter discussed Lincolnshire witches. I began to read. I learned that witches cast spells to cause barrenness or sores that refused to heal. Crop failures were also blamed on them. Bad hygiene and bad husbandry were far more likely explanations of the misfortunes described. Nevertheless, virtually all of the accused women confessed to their crimes, since the methods of questioning were not constrained by modern humanitarian conventions. Methods of execution were barbaric too.

I had been reading for perhaps an hour when I heard a scratching at the door. It stopped. I waited. It started again. I got up and went to the door. As I did so the scratching ceased again. When I opened the door, a black cat marched in as though it owned the place, rubbing against my leg as it passed. At first I thought it was Fisto, but the erect tail betrayed the fact that this cat was female. I wondered why I hadn't seen the tabby before. The cat strutted over to the bed and jumped up on it. I closed the door and went after her.

"Hey," I said, "That's mine!" I picked her up and put her on the floor. As soon as I climbed into bed, she jumped straight back up again and sat on the bedspread staring at me.

"I see," I remarked conversationally, "I suppose this is yours. Well, I hope you don't mind, but I'm borrowing it."

The cat seemed happy to accept a sharing of the bed. She settled down in the bottom corner and curled herself up. I picked up the book again, but when I glanced over at the cat I found her staring at me. After another page I could hardly keep my eyes open. I put the book down and turned out the bedside light. I am sure I must have fallen asleep almost at once.

In the morning when I awoke, I was not alone. I was lying on my side, facing the window, but I could hear quiet breathing and sense a presence behind me. It was not a cat. I rolled over quietly, conscious of a throbbing in the temples which told me that my alcohol intake the previous evening had been excessive. Mrs Kerridge had her back to me, with her chestnut hair spread out across the pillow. She was not wearing a night-dress.

This was not the first time I had woken up with a woman beside me, but it was the first time with no recollection of how the lady got there. The last thing I recalled was placing the book on the bedside table. The book was still there. The cat however, was not.

Since the clock beside the bed showed eight thirty, my feline friend might already have found better things to do, though it was unclear how she had left the room. The room door and the window were both closed. The door to the *en suite* bathroom was ajar. I supposed the cat might have moved over beside the bathroom radiator if the night had been cold.

I tried very hard to remember having sex with Mrs Kerridge. I should remember, no matter how much alcohol I had consumed. Not so much as a shred of memory remained. With a straight conflict between the evidence of my eyes and the evidence of my memory I was inclined to believe the former, though I had never had a blackout before.

The next question was, would she remember? At least it was my bed. That was a reasonable indication that she had been a willing partner; I had not forced my way into her room.

The light filtering through the curtains was still grey, but a quick survey of the room revealed no sign of a night-dress or any other female clothing. Could she possibly have come to my room without clothes?

As gently as I could, I eased myself from the bed. My own clothing lay in an untidy heap over a chair. I picked it up and carried it to the bathroom, which turned out to be another cat-and-clothing-free zone. There I endeavoured to put my thoughts, as well as my person, in order.

When I emerged, Mrs Kerridge was sitting up in bed with the top of the sheet wrapped loosely around her. The long auburn hair cascaded over her bare shoulders and between it and the sheet she was technically decent, give or take a suggestive glimpse or two. I nervously awaited some sign of her mood. She smiled.

"Good morning," she said. "You aren't leaving me so soon? A man who puts his clothes on before a lady is short on stamina. I wouldn't have put you in that class after last night."

"Ah.....no," I said, completely bemused. "I mean, yes, I'm feeling hungry."

"So am I," laughed Mrs Kerridge, "but sadly in your case I suspect you mean food. Never mind, I am not offended. We'll have breakfast together and then you can go off and do your research. I have to go to town this morning, but by tonight I expect you to have recovered your strength!"

There used to be more subtle hints printed in Pravda. The evidence of my ears was now combined with that of my eyes and still in dispute with my memory. I had little alternative but to believe what she said.

"Can your staff be trusted to keep quiet?" I asked.

"Oh, Perkins? He's totally discreet. He wouldn't dream of even remembering your visit, much less remarking on it. Come over here and give me one kiss and then you can go down to breakfast."

I sat on the edge of the bed and kissed her. She responded warmly. I had no recollection of having done it before. A musky fragrance lurked in her hair. She wound her arms around my neck, without troubling to hold up the sheet. Her tongue flicked against my lips. I half thought of changing my mind about breakfast, but she twisted away and was into the bathroom almost before I realised she was gone.

When she emerged she was swathed in a towel. It was barely long enough to reach her thighs and the knot looked fragile. Yes I stared. She raised one slender arm to the top of the open bathroom door and struck a pose that would be familiar to all readers of the Daily Star. She was evidently pleased with my reaction.

"Down boy," she said. "To breakfast that is. I'll be along in a few minutes."

In the morning room, hot coffee and toast were already waiting. Mrs Perkins appeared as if by magic.

"Morning paper, sir? Would you care for bacon and egg, or perhaps a kipper?"

Not the slightest suggestion of embarrassment. I might have been staying in a regular boarding house. As the aroma of kipper floated in from the kitchen, Fisto strolled in looking purposeful and climbed on a chair beside me. Could I make better friends with him if I offered him a share of my kipper? When Mrs Perkins returned I asked her what had happened to the other cat.

"What other cat that would be, sir?" she asked.

That seemed an odd remark from someone in a two cat household.

"I thought I caught sight of a tabby upstairs last night," I said.

For the first time Mrs Perkins looked slightly nervous. "I'm sorry, sir, but you must have been mistaken," she said hesitantly. She indicated Fisto. "It was probably just his lordship here, sir. There's no other cat. He wouldn't have another cat about the place. He enjoys getting all the attention to himself."

It seemed I had gone to sleep with a non-existent cat as well as woken up with a very real lady. To mistake Charlotte for a cat I should have had to be suffering from the raving DT's. Could I have been slipped some hallucinogenic drug? I could not see much point in that, since I had not been going out of my way to display resistance to her charms and it is quite tricky for a man to be much use as a lover whilst unconscious.

Since subtlety was getting me nowhere I adopted the direct approach. "There was a tabby came to my room last night," I insisted. "She scratched on the door to be let in."

Mrs Perkins looked more nervous. "Well, sir, if you say so. Goodness knows how it got in to the house, sir. I hope it wasn't a nuisance to you, sir."

"No," I said, "it wasn't a nuisance."

VII - 09:00 Friday 17th December

"*Let us get up early to the vineyards, let us see if the vines flourish*"

They say there is a first time for everything. They are wrong to say it of course because they also tell you not to worry, it may never happen. They, whoever they are, are not noted for their consistency.

Neither was I that morning. The blackout seriously disturbed me. I ran through the events of the previous night in my mind. I had been sufficiently sober to walk to my bedroom; Perkins had not had to carry me, of that I was quite sure. I remembered clearly that I had stopped to pick up the book and that I had read in bed for some time before the cat arrived. I could remember what I had read. I could remember speaking to the cat. Such clear recollections of what had preceded the blackout seemed inconsistent with a subsequent period of total oblivion induced by alcohol.

Mrs Kerridge had not given the impression that she had been romanced by a sleep walker. I must have been awake. Why would she be lying about a sexual liaison? She was concerned to frustrate my enquiry, but to pretend to an intimate relationship that had not in fact taken place seemed an odd way to go about it. She was the married woman; she was the one with something to lose, not I.

The more I revolved the strange events in my mind the more likely it seemed that I had suffered a brief memory loss. There was no apparent harm done. Provided I did not experience any recurrence I had nothing much to worry about. I may not be an average reasonable man but I am not a hypochondriac.

Mrs Kerridge came down to breakfast in a sheer silk peignoir that did more than suggest nudity underneath. Her hair was immaculately groomed and her delicate nails varnished scarlet. She sat at the table opposite me and sipped orange juice. Her gaze fixed on me over the glass reminded me of the previous evening by the fireside.

"Your eye is better this morning, I hope?" I said.

"Tobias," she said with a smile, "you are repeating yourself. You asked me that last night, remember? I hope I haven't frightened you out of your wits?"

"Not at all," I covered up a trifle anxiously. "I was just concerned about a relapse."

Mrs Kerridge giggled coquettishly and placed a hand over her mouth. "Brought on by the exertion, no doubt," she laughed. "No, Tobias, I have never found sex to strain the eyes. It's masturbation that's supposed to make you go blind, you know."

I choked on a mouthful of kipper. Instantly she was all solicitude, springing from her chair and round to my side of the table in a second. She placed one hand on my shoulder and with the other tapped me lightly on the back. It shouldn't have been hard enough to clear my throat, but it did. The hand lingered on my shoulder and her hair brushed my cheek as she bent down to whisper in my ear.

"Careful, Tobias, fish in the wrong place isn't good for you. I'd stick to toast if I were you."

Another coincidence? Or I had just encountered the second person in twenty four hours sufficiently well educated to know the story of my apocryphal namesake, who in addition to having a blind father was also once attacked by a large fish? It is unusual for me to encounter one such person a month.

When she followed up the whisper with a kiss on the side of my neck I decided I was getting paranoid. I placed my hand over hers where it lay on my shoulder and turned my head towards her. Her face was inches from mine.

"I could always postpone the detective work until this afternoon," I said hopefully.

She laughed and withdrew her hand. "What's the rush?" she flirted, patting me on the head. "Harry won't be back for days." I realised with a guilty start that I had forgotten Sammie's intention to return that same afternoon. "In any case," she was continuing, "I really do have business to attend to this morning, boring though it might be by comparison."

She bent down again and looked me in the eyes. That is, she looked into my eyes but my eyes were somewhat distracted, given the looseness of her peignoir.

"A proper meal should be cooked slowly and savoured for a while in anticipation, don't you agree? We wouldn't want you to get indigestion by biting off more than you can chew, now would we?"

After breakfast, Mrs Kerridge took an affectionate farewell and departed for town in the Range Rover. I phoned Doreen to let her know where I was staying. She enquired whether I was on my way to the graveyard to arrest anyone. When I replied that I was on my way to the local public library, she advised me not to die of boredom and end up in the graveyard myself.

Following Perkins' directions, I found Borminster Library without difficulty. It was at the end of the terrace of shops and looked to have no more shelves than the grocer next door. Posters advertising village societies obscured half of the large front window, with a prominent hand-written sign informing me that the Local History Society would meet on Thursday evening at Glebe Cottage to hear a talk about Borminster in 1899. The speaker was given as a certain Professor Emanuel Loder. There was no indication of where Emanuel Loder might be professing, or what he might profess.

Mrs Pressley sat behind a desk at the back of the library. Borminster, or at least its librarian, had not arrived in the computer age, for the table was half covered with card index boxes. One side of the desk appeared to contain the dockets for each book and the other side tab cards for each borrower. I was surprised that there were so many of either.

Mrs Pressley was large and reassuring. Grey hair framed a weather-beaten face and her visible upper half was clad in Arran and sensible tweed. Horn rimmed spectacles were perched on the end of her nose and she looked over the top of them at me as I came in.

I appeared to be her only customer, though a large, free standing shelf containing outsize volumes divided the single room longitudinally. She quickly disabused me however of the notion that she belonged to the "Shush!" school of librarianship. Indeed it rapidly became obvious that not only was this one of your more chatty librarians, but that her voice would have done credit to a hockey mistress with a megaphone.

"Good morning," she boomed. "Mr. Le Tocq, is it?"

Sammie had assured me that there was nothing in Borminster that Mrs Pressley did not know, but I had not expected the local grapevine to be faster than MI5. Seeing my surprise, she chuckled.

"I heard that you were in Borminster to investigate our celebrated skeleton."

"Mrs Pressley? Sammie Chalmers recommended you to me." Instructed me might have been a more accurate description, but I was still working on the Marlowe bit.

"Dear Sammie," Mrs Pressley smiled, "such a clever girl; always so interested in history, right from primary school. Is Sammie also helping with your enquiries?"

"She was thinking of doing a similar investigation," I said, "and she asked for my help; crime being my business, in a manner of speaking." Crime was maybe my business, but truth appeared not to be. "Actually," I said, "she told me you had written a book about Borminster history."

Mrs Pressley looked pleased. "A 'book' is rather a grand description for my collection of researches. I've put together a lot of information about Borminster from various old sources. I'd be happy to lend it to you, but I don't have it here; it's at home. The library's closed this afternoon. Why don't you bring Sammie round for tea?"

"If she's back from Cambridge in time, I'm sure she'd be delighted." In the meantime, since we were getting on so well, I asked Mrs Pressley what she thought about the body in the garden.

She wrinkled her brow and peered more intently over the spectacles. "I'm particularly interested by the fact that the poor girl had been shot," she said reflectively, or as reflectively as a loud-voiced librarian can. "We have to remember that firearms then were less common and much less convenient to use. Carrying a loaded weapon was an accident in waiting, so guns were normally not loaded until required." Then she wagged her finger as if making a telling point. "Do you think the victim would have sat still whilst the murderer loaded, primed and cocked a flintlock?"

"So we're looking at premeditated murder?" I said. "You're ruling out crimes of passion?"

"Absolutely!" she boomed. "On the spur of the moment a murderer snatches up the first convenient weapon; he doesn't organise himself and take a minute or more loading."

"Definitely a he, then, the murderer?"

"Not at all," Mrs Pressley moderated her volume only slightly as she shook her head. "A man wouldn't need to shoot a woman. He'd bash her over the head or stab her, wouldn't he? No preparation necessary; suitable weapons all over the place. No, my money's on another woman. Now very few women were expert shots, so I expect the fatal ball was discharged from close range. What sort of killing does that suggest to you?"

I found a chair and sat down. This, I figured, could take some time.

"How about planned execution of husband's mistress?" I suggested.

"Subsequently persuading all within earshot and all relatives of the dear departed that they have an interest in covering it up?" Mrs Pressley barked sceptically. "I'd rather start from why the leak that should have happened didn't happen. Why was the cover up successful? Not bribery; no, more likely everyone involved had a personal interest in keeping quiet." Mrs Pressley did her best to look conspiratorial and in a melodramatic voice continued, "What I mean is; they were all guilty."

Her stage whisper might have been heard across the street.

"A conspiracy?" I asked.

Mrs Pressley beamed. Here we go, I thought, another wild conspiracy goose chase. What could motivate a large scale conspiracy? Little chance of a spy scandal in Borminster. Too late for plots against the Crown or going to great lengths to conceal one's popery. I confessed myself baffled.

"I fancy it was something to do with the Rigg family curse," she said. "It's a long story. I'll have to explain some local history."

That was of course the point of my visit, though the previous night's reading had made me sceptical about so-called curses. I nodded.

"Well," she began, "at the end of the sixteenth century there lived in Borminster a celebrated wise woman, Mary Bullivant ... "

Mary, I learned, was reputed to have great healing powers. However, in those days it was common for herbalists to be accused of witchcraft. Disgruntled patients or someone else with a grudge would lay a charge.

Magistrates always convicted to be on the safe side. It eliminated any possibility of vengeance by a witch mistakenly turned loose. Since the estates of convicted witches were forfeit to the crown, which effectively meant the magistrates themselves, there was also a financial incentive. Mary Bullivant was tried before Sir Giles Rigg. This man, an incomer from the London area, had acquired the manor from the grandson of the original Tudor owner.

Mary confessed under torture and was sentenced to be burned on Borminster Common with the expense of the execution borne by her own estate. As the fire was lit, she screamed a fearful curse, bequeathing her skills in sorcery to Sir Giles and his descendants, but pronouncing that every hundred years, on the anniversary of her death, one of the family daughters would be made to pay for death, as she had been.

Well all right, Borminster was not the smoke and its librarian was a little behind the times, but I could not believe that she was taking medieval witchcraft seriously. Before that morning I would have been scornful; Marlowe never suspected the supernatural. At the bottom of any mystery there was usually a good honest crook, if you'll pardon the expression. But even Marlowe might have suspected something if he'd encountered so many hints of witchcraft inside twenty four hours.

"Are you saying you believe in witchcraft?" I asked.

"This is the eve of the twenty-first century, Mr Le Tocq," she intoned sonorously. "No civilised person believes in witchcraft. But the power of superstition; now that is a different issue. It doesn't matter whether you or I believe in curses. What matters is whether someone who has been cursed believes in curses."

By my experiences of the previous night I had uncovered a primitive core of superstition even within myself. When the crust of civilisation was thinner, we used to ritualise our superstitions and call them gods. I made no further comment.

Mrs Pressley took up the tale again. Mary Bullivant was burned on New Year's Eve 1599. It was a rush job. The belief was widespread that all witches renewed their contracts with the Evil One at the stroke of midnight on the last night of a century and that immediately afterwards they could cast spells that would last another hundred years.

After the execution Sir Giles Rigg prospered. His crops were better, his cattle fatter, his children healthier. When he put money into trade with the Low Countries, he made a fortune. It wasn't long before people were muttering that he had indeed acquired Mary Bullivant's powers of sorcery.

"Why should he have worried about what people said?" I asked. "My impression was that the aristocracy in those days could do more or less as they liked."

"My dear boy, you don't know your history!" exclaimed Mrs Pressley. "James I was totally paranoid; obsessed with the fear of assassination and firmly believing that witchcraft was one method by which his murder might be attempted. Before he came to England, he presided personally at witch trials; unheard of for a monarch."

"So he thinks, rightly, that significant numbers of the English ruling class are out to get him," I said. "If he hears rumours that Sir Giles is engaged in witchcraft he'll have had him condemned."

"His estates would have been forfeit to the crown and since by this time Sir Giles was doing very well his estate would have been worth having," Mrs Pressley agreed.

Sir Giles was an astute and resourceful man. He knew that James was chronically short of money. Although the English court opened their hearts to the new king they mostly failed to do the same with their purses. Sir Giles went to meet him as he travelled south through Lincolnshire. He took with him a considerable sum in silver as a gift. He vowed his unswerving allegiance and swore to defend the king with all his might against any foe whatsoever.

"Expensive but smart," I nodded. "The king would be disinclined to believe any rumours after that. Even if he did believe them, he might have thought twice. If your enemies are going to use sorcery against you, having a sorcerer on your side might be no bad thing."

Thereafter Sir Giles was left undisturbed. He continued to prosper. He and his son Edward built up the family fortune and their descendants held on to it through all the political upheavals of the century: civil war, the Commonwealth, the Glorious Revolution. They always seemed to know exactly the right moment to change sides.

"So far not much of a curse," I said.

"But the problem," Mrs Pressley said with emphasis, "was what would happen at the end of 1699?"

By now I was entering into the spirit of this. I begged her not to keep me in suspense. Had the curse worked? Mrs Pressley launched into another tale, almost without pausing for breath.

A great, great granddaughter of Sir Giles, Margaret Rigg, a very beautiful but headstrong young woman, was less than discreet about her supernatural powers. She set her cap at a certain Colonel Wainfleet, a married man, and let it be known that she had the power to bring him to her, no matter if his wife should lock him up in his own bedroom.

When he did come, it turned out that it was his wife who was locked in the bedroom and she was dead; her throat had been slashed open as if by a wild beast. Naturally enough his wife's family, who were very influential people, wanted revenge.

Arrested at Borminster, Colonel Wainfleet came to his senses. He realised that he had only one way out; he was not responsible for his wife's death, but was the victim of witchcraft. He claimed that a huge black cat the size of a sheep had magically appeared in his house and slain his wife as she lay in bed. The cat then fled from the house and he had mounted his horse and given chase, with a couple of deer hounds baying at the cat's heels. He pursued it all the way to Borminster, where the hounds finally ran it to ground in the stables of the Hall.

Mrs Pressley paused for dramatic effect and continued in her best ghost story voice. "He drew his sword and entered the stables with the intention of despatching the beast, but when he got inside there was no leopard to be seen, but only Margaret Rigg, who was panting and flushed as though she had run for miles."

"Well, that had to be one of the world's more transparent alibis," I suggested, though to be honest I was mentally congratulating the astute colonel. If you're going to make up a tale, make up a tale so weird that no-one will believe you could have made it up.

"In those days people believed in witches, Mr. Le Tocq," she said sternly. "Margaret Rigg's own words about bringing him to her came back to haunt her. Then of course she admitted that Wainfleet had found her out of breath in the stables. She claimed that she had heard his horse as he rode into the yard and had rushed down from her room to meet him."

"Sounds reasonable," I said.

"But you are a modern, civilised man; not a man of a century which saw thousands of innocent women put to death."

"Where were the hounds?" I asked.

She looked a little perplexed at my interruption of her story.

"If Wainfleet was telling the truth the deer hounds should have been at Borminster, where he and Margaret Rigg were arrested. If he'd actually killed his wife and fled the scene of the crime he'd hardly have stopped to pick up his hounds, so they'd have been at his home. That should have been an easy defence for Margaret."

"Goodness me, there was no such thing as defence!" Mrs Pressley boomed. "We're talking about a seventeenth century witch trial!"

Apparently the accused was not even allowed to confess voluntarily. The theory was that unless confession was wrung out of a witch by torture she didn't really mean it. Accused women were imprisoned in rat-infested, filthy dungeons; there were beatings and rapes by gaolers. Margaret may have been spared the worst because of her rank, but she might still have been subjected to pricking by a witch-finder searching for the witch's mark. The vicar of Borminster sealed her fate, reminding the court of the story of Mary Bullivant and suggesting that Margaret was now in possession of Mary's magical powers.

"The vicar sounds more pagan than Christian to me," I said.

"Well, eventually she confessed, as everyone did. The remarkable coincidence however was the date of her execution."

"December 31st, 1699," I said.

Mrs Pressley nodded. "The rest of the family somehow managed to escape, though they must have used up every ounce of political and financial credit they possessed. In addition they had to pay the expenses of Margaret's trial and execution, exactly as Mary Bullivant had foretold. And of course since the Mary Bullivant story had come up at the trial there was a widespread belief that the curse had come upon the family and that nothing could stop the same thing happening again in another hundred years."

"But by 1799, surely the idea of witchcraft had been discredited?" I objected.

"You’re right of course," she replied. "After 1736 the law against it was repealed. From that time on it was only possible to be prosecuted for ‘pretended witchcraft,’ with a maximum sentence of one year's imprisonment. In any case the reputation of the Rigg family had been so far rehabilitated by the middle of the century that James Rigg, the head of the family, had been elevated to the peerage as the first Lord Kesford."

"In other words, educated people regarded the whole thing as a fairy tale."

"As I said before, the question is not what was generally believed, but what the family themselves believed," Mrs Pressley said sagely. "Folk are still terribly superstitious today; aren’t they? Have you, Mr Le Tocq, never thrown salt over your shoulder?"

"There's a major difference between trivial superstition and something involving death," I objected, declining to own up. "Are you really suggesting that as the next anniversary approached the family somehow got someone killed?"

She nodded energetically. "It would explain the total silence about the disappearance!" she insisted forcefully. "Not only did some female die, but afterwards everyone around the Hall would have been convinced that the family had the power of sorcery. One death on the anniversary might have been a coincidence, but two!"

A death on New Year's Eve 1799 was consistent with the rough forensic dating of the skeleton. On the other hand this girl had been murdered, not judicially executed like Mary Bullivant and Margaret Rigg. If the family had still believed in the curse would they have gone so far as a ritual sacrifice? Would that explain why she had been buried with the necklace?

"And do you know of any mysterious death in the Delabor family in 1899?" I asked.

"Well no. But then I hadn't any idea that there might have been one in 1799 until a few days ago. The superstition might just have stretched as far as the end of the eighteenth century, but it wouldn't go on into the nineteenth, would it? And the Rigg family died out too, so any vestige of the superstition would have died with them. There would be no reason for the Delabor family to believe in it."

I could have suggested a reason. The Delabors were descendants of Giles Rigg. Yet Victorian gentry believed in machines, electric power, steam ships; not in the sorcery of witches who'd been dead for three hundred years.

"Come and hear Professor Loder on Thursday," said Mrs Pressley. She produced from a nearby shelf a paperback with a picture of a balding, sharp featured man on the back cover. "He's bringing a collection of slides: steam threshing machines, early motor cars, that sort of thing. Victorian Borminster was really quite modern. The Delabor family themselves invested in business. Sir Michael's great grandfather did quite well for himself."

"Just like Sir Giles Rigg and his trading venture to the Low Countries," I said.

"Really, Mr. Le Tocq, are you going to suggest that everyone who prospers in business is in league with the Devil? Now do remember to bring dear Sammie to tea this afternoon. Glebe Cottage is just half a mile up the road on the left hand side as you go towards the Hall. You can't miss it."

I took the book, thanked her profusely for her trouble and promised to do my best to bring Sammie. Then I went and started up the car and sat in it. Even with the engine running it was still cold. I was definitely going to find myself a Riley. With half an eye on the library, I scanned the paperback.

After about five minutes I turned the engine off, got out of the car and walked across the street to the paper shop. When I was far enough inside the shop not to be seen from outside, I turned and looked back to the library in time to see a short, dark complexioned man with a Pancho Villa moustache emerge from the door.

Did you ever notice some guy on a street corner, lounging against a wall and pretending to read a newspaper whilst not too discreetly watching a shop front fifty yards down the road? Yes? Well that wasn't anybody who understood surveillance. More than likely, that guy was the Old Bill; some policemen really do look like TV soap actors playing policemen. They are so conspicuous they might as well display signs saying 'This is a stake-out; pretend I'm not here.' Me, I had actually learned the surveillance techniques that Fred had taught me; you wouldn't have spotted me when I was working.

This guy was an Amateur with a capital *A*. A broad brimmed Australian bush hat concealed the upper part of his face and a long stockman's gabardine covered him to below the knees. It was the sort of gear you'd expect to see sported by one of those loud and ostentatious hoorays that you are occasionally unfortunate enough to meet at a point to point.

The hooray glanced across the street towards the paper shop and then walked a few yards down the Lincoln road and climbed into a Mercedes estate. For a hooray he had kept amazingly quiet during my interview with Mrs Pressley. He hadn't even shuffled his feet. Now he was sitting in his car, ostensibly reading the paper. They never learn.

Since I had no obvious excuse to linger in the paper shop, I bought myself a 'Times' and headed back to the MG.

VIII - 11:00 Friday 17th December

"Who is she that looketh forth as the morning?"

The vicarage in Borminster was a substantial Victorian house which stood beside the main road to the Hall, at the foot of a narrow lane leading uphill to St Winifred's parish church. I could see from the road that St Winifred's was extravagant in scale for the size of the village, its tower topped by a broach spire and the aisle windows facing the road beautiful examples of late perpendicular Gothic. In the later Middle Ages some rich local landowner or wool merchant had felt the need of a spectacular display of piety, or perhaps had felt the weight of his sins sufficiently to think that a major investment in reducing his time in Purgatory was required.

The church itself was surrounded by a graveyard extending to several acres, with traditional yews similar to those which must originally have surrounded the walled garden at the Hall. In the cemetery most headstones were traditional decorative funerary sculpture of angels and draped urns but at the upper right hand corner, behind the church, was the neo-classical family vault of the lords of the manor.

As I opened the garden gate the Mercedes slid past behind me, doing about ten miles an hour on the road to the Hall. I did not turn to see if Hooray was staring at me. It fitted.

If Charlotte and Michael were, as the phone conversation suggested, concerned to keep tabs on me, they were unlikely to watch me themselves. On the other hand unless you are a serious player good help is hard to find at very short notice. If it had been something I cared about I would have been offended; you know the way a Leyton Orient supporter is offended when Manchester United turn out a whole team of reserves against them in a cup tie. In fact this was worse, seeing as how Man U reserves are probably more than a match for Orient.

Even in the depth of an icy winter the garden of the vicarage looked neat and tidy. The Reverend John Peabody was out in his garden when I arrived, wearing a droopy brimmed tweed hat, well worn anorak and jeans. He looked up with a smile from his pruning and greeted me warmly. When I introduced myself however, the smile slipped a bit. I tugged my hat forward a little and gave him a quizzical look from under the peak.

"I apologise, Mr. Le Tocq," he replied shamefacedly. "You won't believe it, but I was half expecting a man with a French name."

In Jersey that is a commonplace, but not in Lincolnshire. I waited for him to explain further.

"We … my wife and I … received a message about it. Would you like to come inside and have some coffee? I think there might be a thaw on the way, but it’s still bitterly cold, isn't it?"

I was curious to know what was troubling him and I thought he would probably tell me if I gave him enough time. Also, it was a while since breakfast and I could use another coffee. I consume so much of the stuff whilst working that I develop withdrawal symptoms in less than two hours.

The vicar led the way up the path and round to the back door, which led directly into the kitchen by way of a porch cluttered with discarded Wellingtons, gloves and other gardening gear. Mrs Peabody was at work in the kitchen stirring a bubbling pan of marmalade on top of an Aga which radiated a cosy warmth throughout the room. The vicar introduced me.

"Oh my goodness!" she exclaimed clapping a hand to her mouth.

I was by now convinced that something was very unusual, if not actually rotten, in the state of Borminster.

Reverend Peabody smiled wanly. "The hand of Providence is clearly in the business, my dear." He invited me to take a chair at the kitchen table. "Terribly cold still, outside. Not a lot of signs of the promised thaw."

I could see that he could not be rushed. What he had to say to me was difficult, but he intended to get round to it. I took off my coat, sat down at the table and waited for him to begin. In the end he decided on a roundabout approach and began with an odd question, his words hesitant as he struggled with embarrassment

"Have you ever heard of automatic writing, Mr. Le Tocq?"

It seemed an unusual question for a vicar, but I did my best. "Ouija boards? That sort of thing?"

Taking a deep breath he began again. "I suppose you may be aware that the Church of England is pretty sceptical on the subject of spiritualism? A well founded scepticism in the main. Many downright charlatans. But some are genuine to the extent that they believe in their own psychic powers."

I realised that he was making an advance apology for something that I might find ridiculous or shocking; something concerned with spiritualism in general and automatic writing in particular. I longed to tell him just to spit it out, but I was afraid that might cause him to clam up altogether.

Mrs Peabody interrupted, "There are other possible explanations for what people genuinely believe to be spirit messages," she said. "ESP for example. But once you admit the possibility of the paranormal then you simply substitute one inexplicable power for another. John finds it hard to say this to you because it contradicts his beliefs. But to my way of thinking it is hardly more surprising to receive telepathic messages from the dead than from living."

It seemed I was being prepared for the announcement that the message to expect me had come from the dead, or at least that the couple believed that it had.

"Like the Glastonbury Abbey excavations?" I asked. The historic existence of certain chapels at Glastonbury was documented but nobody knew where in the site to look. An archaeological team however found them at the first attempt. They were supposed to have been directed by a sketch map drawn by the spirit of a monk who had been dead for four hundred years.

The vicar grimaced. "The director of the Glastonbury dig was ridiculed and his career was ruined," he sighed. "I too have to be a little careful. My bishop would not be sympathetic if he were to learn how we came to be expecting you."

"He won't learn it from me," I told him.

It was Mrs Peabody who made the decisive move. She went over to the Welsh dresser which stood against the wall opposite the Aga. It was a good solid country piece, with a display of plates depicting hunting scenes. In these politically correct days I wondered if hunting parsons were popular with their bishops to start with. Mrs Peabody took out a piece of paper from the right hand drawer of the dresser. She placed it on the kitchen table in front of me and then started to make coffee. The paper contained a sentence of oddly sloped writing.

"Edith wrote that," Reverend Peabody said. "That is to say, physically she wrote it. However we're convinced that her hand was guided supernaturally." He looked at me earnestly as if fearing that I might not after all be the visitor that he had expected.

As she put coffee in the cups, Mrs Peabody explained further. "I wrote that message with my left hand," she said, "despite the fact that I'm naturally right handed."

She was holding the spoon in her right hand and the coffee jar in her left. She put down the spoon, picked up the jar lid in her right hand and screwed it back on the jar. She picked up the kettle with her right hand and poured water into the cups.

"I didn't read what I wrote; not at the time. I was in a sort of trance, barely conscious of my hand moving." She looked over her shoulder to see how I was taking this revelation and then went on. "It's happened several times. I just feel this compulsion to write. It's as though I've become a channel for someone else's thoughts, do you see?" With her right hand she took milk from the fridge and then added, "Only it appears that this someone else happens to be dead."

I didn't laugh. She obviously didn't find it funny.

The paper read:

> *"A Frenchman will come. Tell him he must look for Victoria."*

Now for a spirit message, that is lucid. Indeed for the average semi-literate product of the modern education system, that is lucid. Spirit messages should be vague and garbled. I began to wonder whether this was a hoax, but I could no more think of a reason why the Peabodys should deceive me than why Charlotte should deceive me about our love-making; once again it was they who stood to lose by disclosure.

"You said there were other messages?"

"Yes, several. This one was about six months ago," Mrs Peabody replied. "I thought about going to the doctor, but in the end we decided to pray. It seemed to us that nothing like this could happen if it were not God's will. I expect you'll think we're crazy, but there's no explanation we can think of other than that these messages are exactly what they appear to be. Somehow a troubled soul is using me to communicate with this world."

"And maybe communicate about me, though my name is the only French thing about me. I come from Jersey."

"But why use me?" Mrs Peabody asked. "Why not someone who knows you?"

"No-one knows me around here," I said. "I'm not sure whether ghosts are of restricted mobility, but they do say that particular places are haunted, don't they? So, does our ghost have a name?"

"Oh yes," Mrs Peabody nodded vigorously," she gives her name as Caroline Rigg."

This stretched the long arm of coincidence. Lady Caroline Rigg was one of the four descendants of Lady Anne Kesford that Sammie and I had identified the previous day as possible murder victims. She was the subject of the child portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

"Do you think it's it possible that the skeleton discovered at The Hall is Caroline Rigg?" I asked, switching abruptly from their problem to mine.

"Oh no!" Mrs Peabody exclaimed. "Caroline passed over during a sea voyage. She was on her way back to England from India."

She went back to the dresser and took out a large manila envelope from the drawer. She removed from it several sheets of paper similar to the one which I already held, flicked through them, selected one and placed it in front of me. A few seconds later she followed it, apologetically, with the coffee. I took a sip as I read.

> *"On the first day of the new century, before dawn, I awoke with a terrible presentiment of catastrophe. I knew I must return home from India. I took passage in the Honourable Company's ship the Golden Venture. She foundered in Biscay and all her souls with her. I found myself translated into a strange half life - somehow confined to this place. I bade Victoria leave whilst she could, not stay like the others."*

"You'll have checked whether Caroline Rigg went from Borminster to India?" I asked.

"We did. She married a Captain Prescott of the East India Company in 1798 when she was seventeen. They left for Bombay later that same year," the vicar replied. The family tree had shown Caroline Rigg as unmarried.

"And you didn't know of Caroline's story before you received the messages?" I asked.

"I'm not a historian. I'd never heard of her or 'the Honourable Company'. Since then I've discovered it means the Honourable East India Company. It's a pompous sort of name for a firm don't you think?" Mrs Peabody smiled nervously.

"The sepoys couldn't get used to the idea that they weren't working for a single person," I said. "They liked to call the boss sahib, so they called the company sahib. That translates as honourable company." I didn't remember where I'd come across that little gem. It surprised me as much as Mrs Peabody.

"After I got the messages I went to the Hall to see what I could find out about Caroline. I got the most peculiar feeling as I stood there and looked at her picture; just as if I were receiving a photograph from a pen friend," she said.

"Do you realise, Mr Le Tocq, that the Reynolds portrait is not the only memento of Caroline Rigg on display at the Hall?" Reverend Peabody asked me. "Did you perhaps look round the Millennium Exhibition in the East Wing?"

I confessed that my brief tour of the previous day had omitted it.

"You should go and see it," he said earnestly. "In the 1799 section, there's a letter written by Caroline Rigg from India to her older brother George. It describes Caroline's life in Bombay and other places she visited."

I waited.

"As a detective, you'll perhaps have some experience with handwriting, forgery of signatures, that kind of thing?"

Well now, I thought, it's a bold forger who introduces the topic of forgery to the conversation. I nodded.

"All I can say," he finally got out, "is that to the unpractised eye, the handwriting in that letter bears an uncanny resemblance to that on the paper in front of you."

Now that is what you call a punch line. Fortunately I wouldn't need to rely on my own judgement. Our agency had dealings with an expert on calligraphy who could tell me for sure if the writing was the same. All I need do was borrow one of Edith's messages, photograph the letter at the Hall and send the pair of them to Carl for analysis.

As it turned out I didn't have to borrow one of the messages. I was on the point of asking for one when Mrs Peabody stiffened and sat bolt upright in her chair. She looked across the table at me with a blank expression; her eyes glazed. Reverend Peabody put a finger to his lips to motion me to silence. He went over to the dresser and collected a sheet of paper and a pencil, then came back to the table and removed the coffee cup from in front of his wife, placing the paper on the table and the pencil in her left hand. With commendable presence of mind he then moved the pan of marmalade to the cooler end of the Aga's hot plate, before sitting down beside his wife at the table. He had evidently been through this movie before.

We waited for just a few moments in silence; then Mrs Peabody began to write, quickly and perfectly legibly with her left hand. I had of course little evidence except her word and her recent behaviour that Mrs Peabody was not normally left handed. Her left handed writing was fluent. I could see the letters forming the curious slope which I had already noted in the previous messages. She wrote half a side and then stopped, sighed and put down the pencil. Her eyes focused on me again.

"This message is for you," she said, pushing the paper across the table towards me without reading what she had written. She seemed tired.

I was astonished. "Does it normally happen just like this?" I asked.

"It's the first time that anyone has been present besides John," she replied, "but then, before you came no-one else needed to know."

It was not what I expected. I ought to have felt something; sensed some presence. I wasn't aware of anything at all.

Reverend Peabody confirmed that he also was unaware of anything abnormal. "I just react to Edith. I try and make it as easy as possible for her because she finds it so exhausting."

I picked up the paper and read what was written on it:

> *"Quills are not pencils, but my hand is my hand. Look again at my portrait. And please find what became of Victoria. We have only two weeks to prevent disaster."*

I passed the message back to Mrs Peabody who read it in silence and passed it to her husband. This was getting close to amateur hour. They expect a man with a French name; they now lay on a special delivery of automatic writing?

And yet, would not hoaxers have produced a message more in line with popular expectations of automatic writing? Edith Peabody was, if this were all to be believed, one of the most remarkable mediums that the world had ever seen.

Sensing my reluctance to accept such a message as genuine, Mrs Peabody told me that I was right to be sceptical. "Six months ago," she said, "I would have felt exactly the same." She looked genuinely unhappy.

"I'm not accusing anyone of fraud, Mrs Peabody." Not yet anyway, I said to myself. "I'm just struggling to understand it all."

There was certainly a mystery to be solved in Borminster and that was, after all, what I had come for. Nothing much was likely to be lost by giving the messages the benefit of the doubt; I was wide awake for the first sign of an angle.

"Do you have any idea who this Victoria is ... or was rather, since I assume she's dead?" I asked.

"I'm sorry," I've no idea, she said. I was glad to hear it. Too much background knowledge would have been suspicious.

If the message was genuine, then what had happened at Borminster must have happened on December 31st 1799. The alleged Caroline had allegedly experienced the sensation before New Year’s dawn in Bombay, still the previous day in Borminster.

I had little doubt that Victoria would turn out to be a later member of the family. To judge by these writings, she could not be the body in the garden. An 1899 victim? The alleged Caroline did seem to think that the fate of Victoria was relevant and implied that whatever had happened to Victoria had not happened in Borminster. That was just as well; I was unprepared for a second ghost wandering around Borminster in ignorance of the first. I should soon be expecting to see Mrs Kerridge riding across the sky on a broomstick. It was about time for a little detective work to replace the hearsay and superstition.

"You don’t have any idea, Mr. Le Tocq, what is supposed to happen in two weeks time?" Reverend Peabody asked hopefully. "How on earth can it be prevented when she doesn't tell us what it is?"

"Perhaps she doesn’t know," I suggested, with my straightest possible face. Mrs Pressley had been dismissive, but if there had been a death in 1899, possibly of a woman named Victoria, then the feared disaster in two weeks' time could be the murder of another young woman. "And at the moment I don’t know either, but you can rely on me to find out."

For just about the last time what I meant was that they could rely on Marlowe. They seemed relieved.

I don’t like coincidences and it was a remarkable coincidence that I should receive evidence apparently supportive of the curse theory so soon after meeting Mrs Pressley. It smelled like a set up, but a set up involving outwardly respectable people who had no discernible motive.

And there was one piece that didn’t fit. According to Mrs Pressley, the curse specified that the victim must pay for death. That was certainly true in 1599 and 1699, but by 1799 witchcraft was no longer illegal and witches were neither executed nor had their property confiscated. People don't as a rule pay to get themselves murdered.

And even if I read the runes correctly, on the evidence so far I could hardly start handing out warnings of a murder planned for two weeks hence. Who should I warn to be on their guard and against whom? And if, as it appeared, the threat was to members of the Delabor family, why should two members of the family have an interest in obstructing the investigation?

I had come to the vicarage with questions of my own. I wanted to know whether any of four female members of the Rigg family were buried in the family vault. Now it seemed that one of them, Lady Caroline, certainly was not.

"Could you perhaps tell me, vicar," I asked, "whether any of these members of the Rigg family are buried here?" I consulted my scribbled notes. "Hester Rigg, Leticia Tansworthy , Alice Compton?"

Reverend Peabody shook his head. "None of them are buried in the vault. I'm sorry. You're welcome to look for yourself of course."

"No problem. People buried in the graveyard can't also be buried in the walled garden. My short list has already been shortened by one."

The vicar insisted that I stay for lunch. I was invited to come back at any time and assured that I would be welcome both at the vicarage and at the church services for so long as I stayed in Borminster.

After lunch I drove along the road to the Hall and saw the Mercedes pick up my trail as I passed the first road junction. If Hooray was really going to spend all this time sitting in his car in this weather it was to be hoped for his sake that his heater was more effective than mine. He turned into the estate entrance after me, but did not follow me into the public car park. The Mercedes disappeared from view behind the Hall.

I paid my £3.50 for a guide book and joined an official tour, sporting my new digital camera like any other tourist. When we reached the Millennium Exhibition I hung back until the tour party left and then, alone in the room, I examined the display case which housed Lady Caroline's letter from India.

It was a relatively simple matter to pick the lock. I carefully lifted out the letter and placed it on a case beside the window, where I took half a dozen photographs with the lens as close as I could focus. Then I returned the letter to its display case, re-locking it as easily as it had been opened.

Tourists were not numerous at that time of year and no other party had yet arrived, so I found my way to the long room and positioned myself once again in front of the Reynolds portrait of Lady Caroline. I could see nothing that I had not seen before; the sort of cherubic androgynous child with long curly hair and flowing clothes that seemed to fascinate painters of the period. A spinning top lay on the ground in front of her and she carried a whip with which to propel it to life again. The face had an angelic expression with eyes fixed on something out of the picture.

I was almost resigned to departing with nothing more learned when it dawned on me that there was something unusual after all.

The child had the whip in her left hand.

IX - 16:00 Friday 17th December

"*They all hold swords, being expert in war.*"

Sammie breezed into Lincoln just as dusk approached, tootling the Mini's musical horn in recognition as she passed where I sat in the MG. The town was thronged with Christmas shoppers but she pulled promptly into the only vacant parking space which had appeared as if by magic five seconds earlier. I had been sitting for only a few minutes, but I was already beginning to feel the chill and I was happy to encounter the warmth as we passed through the door of the aptly named"Witch's Cauldron" tea shop not far from the Cathedral Close. Sammie ordered a pot of tea and hot buttered crumpets for two.

She was dressed somewhat differently from the previous day. In place of the casual jeans and sweater was a short black skirt and black rib-knit top covered by a smartly tailored scarlet jacket. She still wore no make up, but the long blonde hair was brushed back and gathered into a pony tail and a gold chain hung about her neck, with a pendant resembling an eight pointed star around a central ruby. I told her she looked fabulous. She told me I looked frozen. The sparkle in her voice was reflected in her eyes.

"So how did you get on with Charlotte?"

Now I had read enough of the script to anticipate this question. It is part of my stock in trade to be able to display a poker face at all times.

"She was very pleasant. I can truthfully say that I haven't eaten so well in a long time and I had never drunk Mouton Rothschild in my life."

Sammie grimaced. "That's Orson. He's on first name terms with half the big name growers in France so they say. He's disgustingly wealthy. In fact he's disgusting in several ways. He really deserves Charlotte. But since he's not around at the moment I hope that you remembered my advice to stay out of Charlotte's bedroom."

"Your aunt unfortunately suffered a severe pain in her eye, just as we were having coffee after dinner. She had to retire to bed early and alone."

"Did she now?" Sammie smiled. "How very unfortunate for her and how very lucky for you. She has sharp claws, that one. She may purr when she's stroked, but she can draw blood the next minute."

Even with my poker face on, I found the cat metaphor a little disconcerting.

"I'm invited to stay again tonight."

Sammie frowned. "I expected as much. Fortunately you now have me to look out for you. On your behalf I shall make the supreme sacrifice and invite myself to stay with Charlotte as well. Please note that I wouldn't do this for everyone. I remember my time under Charlotte's roof with very little pleasure. I used to be longing for the end of the holidays so I could get back to school. But I'm a big girl now; things are a little different."

You may well consider that a male of more than adequate build and nearly six feet in height might be affronted at the idea that he needed protection to be supplied by a slip of a girl several years his junior, not to mention six inches shorter. Moreover nothing that had happened the previous evening had suggested to me that I needed protecting from anything. Indeed I had rather looked forward to the second house performance of this particular show, since for some unaccountable reason I seemed to have slept through the first.

I rather fancied that I could cope with Sammie and her aunt separately but I anticipated problems in handling both at once, if you'll forgive the expression and I didn't imagine a threesome was what Sammie had in mind.

"I don’t want you to put yourself out," I said. "I really am quite a big boy myself."

Sammie did not look the least bit offended. "Against ordinary villains," she said, "I’m sure that you’re more than competent. But Charlotte is not ordinary; take my word for it." Since there was obviously nothing to be gained by argument I did take her word for it. They say that you never miss what you’ve never had. I’m not sure what they say about what you can’t remember having had.

"Mind you," said Sammie, reverting to the subject of whether private detectives were competent, "I used to watch Bergerac, you know. He came across some fairly heavy duty bad guys in Jersey. Is it like that in real life?"

"Most of his problems were imported," I replied. "That’s why he worked for the *Bureau des Etrangers*. That's a fictional police department, of course."

"I love your French accent," she declared. "Say that again!"

"You mean *Bureau des Etrangers*?" I queried.

"That’s fabulous!" she clapped her hands. "I never heard anything like that. It’s French but at the same time it’s not French, isn’t it? But Tobias isn’t a French name. Were you named after your father?"

"My father’s name was David."

"Well, well," she said, "and you pronounce that the English way, not the French. How interesting! Now where do you suppose that waiter’s got to?" She glanced around the room.

With the arrival of tea and crumpets Sammie turned her attention to our mutual interest in the Borminster body. I described my interview with Mrs Pressley and reported that we were both invited to tea.

"Good," said Sammie, "I'm starving." She finished her first crumpet and started on her second. "And Mrs Pressley makes delicious cream cakes." She licked the liquid butter that was running down her fingers. "I have heard of the Rigg family curse. My mother used to scare me with tales about Mary Bullivant when I was a little girl." She slurped the butter and smiled. "Margaret Rigg? No – never heard of her. I didn't know there really was a second, let alone a third centennial death. I thought it was just a myth." That was another ‘very interesting’ idea in which she promptly lost interest. "These are great after a cold drive," she enthused. "I've been looking forward to them for the last ten miles." She was talking with her mouth full.

"Did you deliver skull safely to the university medical labs?"

"I did," Sammie slurped some more butter. "Myra has been working with a software developer in the Science Park. They designed a program for use in plastic surgery. They were using a laser scanner to map the face of patients and produce a simulation of the underlying bone structure on the screen.

"Then some bright spark reckoned that it would be a great boon to forensics if you could run such a program backwards; I mean to say if you could use the laser scanner on the skull and reconstruct an image of what the face would have looked like. The program is much better than the old fashioned way – you know, working in plaster? Strange to relate, they're short of skulls to try it out on! They were happy to co-operate when I told them it would be of assistance to a police investigation. We should have a hard copy within a couple of days."

"What police investigation might that be?" I enquired mildly.

"Oh details, details!" Sammie waved away the objection. "When we get the picture we can compare it with the three portraits of potential victims."

"With two of them," I said. "Lady Caroline Rigg is not the body in the garden."

"How do you know that?" Sammie asked in surprise.

"She told me," I said. "Allegedly."

Seeing Sammie's look of astonishment, I described my unearthly experience at the vicarage and my subsequent visit to the Hall. "Lady Caroline was left handed and Mrs Peabody wrote these messages with her left hand despite being right handed," I concluded.

"Good grief!" Sammie looked stunned. "A medium; whoever would have thought that dear old Edith had it in her?"

I was relieved that Sammie, at least to outward appearances, didn't think the idea was mad. I could do without more strictures along the lines of "You're supposed to be a detective." It was just as well I hadn't had to try and explain the mystery of the disappearing cat.

Sammie paused to finish off her second crumpet and pour herself another cup of tea from the pot. Then, with a frown on her face, she asked, "Did you check on this Victoria?"

That had been another discovery of my extended tourist visit. In addition to Victoria Kerr there had been a second Victoria on the family tree, Victoria Delabor, born 1880. There was no record of what had become of this Victoria or whether she had had children.

"Shouldn't think so," Sammie shook her head with her mouth still full, "because her descendants would have been close relatives of mine and I've not heard of them. People tend not to remain anonymous if there's even a slim chance of inheriting a title."

"It's not impossible that Victoria was a fourth in the sequence of murders," I said.

"Whoa there, Sherlock!" Sammie grinned. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves here. I know of one witch burning in 1599. Mrs Pressley says there was another in 1699. Now you and I might be tempted to call those deaths murder, but the law at the time did not. If, and that's a big if, we can show that the body in the garden was killed in 1799, that makes one murder. It's a little premature to be talking about a sequence, don't you think?"

"In 1899 Victoria would have been roughly the same age that the girl in the garden was when she died or Margaret Rigg was when she died."

"You mean, *if* Victoria died in 1899. All that you have at the moment is a vague reference to her disappearance that comes from a pretty dodgy source."

"All I can tell you is, the source didn't look dodgy to me," I bristled a little. I was worried for this girl and she resolutely refused to be worried for herself. From where I was sitting there was circumstantial evidence that unpleasant happenings had a habit of befalling female members of her family on the last night of each century. The present century had little more than two weeks to run. "If this so called curse is based on a real centennial tradition of death, then there's a risk to you this year. You'd better watch your back."

"You can help me watch it," said Sammie, not looking the least perturbed, "I'd like that." She smiled that winning smile of hers at me. "Look, I admitted to hearing of the curse, not believing in it. It used to scare me when I was a kid, but as I told you, I'm a big girl now." She promptly changed the subject yet again. "Did you check out the actual facts in Edith's story?"

"I downloaded my best digital photograph of Lady Caroline's letter and faxed it and the alleged automatic writing to an expert calligraphist." I showed her both documents. She took a hard look at them.

"Did you know that Edith was an artist?" she asked sceptically. "If she wanted to copy someone's handwriting she'd make a pretty good job of it."

"She would need to be quite an actress too," I said, quite irrationally exasperated with her scepticism. "Oh, and my secretary is contacting the British Museum to find out who would have records of the East India Company. She'll check the fate of the Golden Venture if she can."

Doreen had also asked if anyone was paying for this work and I replied that I was. She was unimpressed. I did not report this bit to Sammie.

"Gosh, you have been busy," Sammie grinned impishly. "Any more?"

I took a deep breath. "Can you think of any reason why Charlotte and Sir Michael might not want us to discover the truth about the body?"

She paused and took another sip of her tea. "Why do you think they don’t?"

"I'm afraid that gumshoes are inveterate eavesdroppers."

Sammie was beautiful when she smiled; she now flashed pure white teeth at me in a broad grin. "I'm glad you're on my side," she whispered. "You are on my side, aren't you Toby? Charlotte hasn't cast a spell on you?"

At the time I took her to be speaking figuratively. In the book that I had read the previous night, words such as 'bewitched' and 'spellbound' were expressive of fear. In modern speech a lover uses them to refer to the object of his desire and the theatre critic to praise an outstanding performance.

"Your feelings about Charlotte appear to be reciprocated," I said, "assuming that I wasn`t mistaken about what I heard."

"Tell me some news," said Sammie with a grimace, "I told you she's hated me for years." The forcefulness of her words surprised me a little. Why someone who appeared so self possessed should be so keen for an ally I couldn't fathom, but at that moment I was very pleased to have been elected. If I was out of my depth with Mrs Kerridge, I felt disarmed and relaxed by her niece.

"She does try to cover it in public," I said. Then as an afterthought I added, "There's one more thing. For most of the day I've been followed by a guy with a droopy moustache who drives a Mercedes estate and does quite the most conspicuous surveillance routine I've ever witnessed. Whoever taught this guy spying should be shot. In fact, come to think of it, he's probably been shot already."

"What does this spy look like?"

"He wears a gabardine with cape shoulders and a big brimmed bush hat. He was about fifty yards down the street until we came in here. He's moved away now."

"What a jackass he is," Sammie exclaimed. "Why on earth should Anthony be following you?"

"Anthony?" I asked. Then I placed the name. "Your cousin?"

"Unless there are two idiots around here with droopy moustaches, bushranger gear and Mercedes estates," Sammie exclaimed with some venom. "I wish I'd seen him. I still owe him a kick where it hurts for pinching my behind the last time we met."

If Michael's son was following me, it did rather confirm that Michael was not keen on my enquiries. "Would I be right in assuming that Anthony wouldn't be acting alone?" I asked Sammie.

"He couldn't get down a flight of steps on his own! This means Charlotte will be expecting me, which is a nuisance, because I'd have liked to surprise her. Never mind, we'll still go and see Mrs Pressley first. I refuse to be done out of my cream cakes."

I wasn't sure where Sammie planned to put a second tea. I already felt pleasantly full. However we paid the bill and left the shop. Sammie insisted on paying her share but then volunteered to let me drive her to Borminster. The Mini, she said, was 'unstealable' and could stay where it was until tomorrow morning.

She collected her bag from the Mini's boot and flung it into the MG. The Mini looked far from unstealable to me and I told her so, but she repeated that it would be quite safe and dragged a scarf out of her bag to wind round her neck. She had already had experience of the MG's lack of an effective heater.

As I drove along to Borminster, she chatted about France and the Channel Islands and asked me about my background. It almost began to feel like a date. Mrs Pressley confirmed the impression by declaring, as she unwound her arms from around Sammie, that we made a lovely couple. Sammie did nothing to dispel the impression.

I don't think that my attitude should be considered unreasonable. I was on holiday to enjoy myself and Sammie's company was very enjoyable. Was I supposed to feel guilty about a fling with her aunt that I couldn't even recall? In any case I had met both Charlotte and Sammie at the same time and it was not as though either had any sort of prior claim on me.

So now I was with Sammie and if Sammie wanted to make out that we were a couple in front of Mrs Pressley that was all right with me. I was irritated to find that I did feel twinges of guilt, groundless though they were. Somehow I felt that I had let Sammie down and that that was a bad thing to do to a girl who was without friends and possibly in danger. I felt my protective instincts stirring.

Sammie was right about the cream cakes, of which she somehow managed to consume three. There was some discussion of Mary Bullivant and Margaret Rigg but Sammie never so much as hinted that she had evidence of the body being a member of the family. She accepted the loan of Mrs Pressley's exercise book full of local history notes with enthusiasm and sneaked a quick look at the section relating to 1800.

Around six o'clock she declared quite suddenly that it was time to go and call on Charlotte. Mrs Pressley made Sammie promise to come to the meeting of the local history society the following week and gave her another hug as we departed.

On the way to the Kerridge house Sammie became very taciturn.

"Look," I said, "are you sure you want to do this? I'm sure you won't enjoy staying with your aunt. I could take you to the Hall or a hotel if you like."

"Don't worry," she laughed, "I've told you I can handle it and you do need looking after, whether you realise it or not."

I said nothing. So far as I knew the only threat I faced from Mrs Kerridge was her likely reaction to my turning up with her niece.

"Charlotte is thirty-six going on twenty-one," said Sammie. "She resolutely refuses to act her age." I noted that today Sammie was not going to pass up the opportunity of getting her retaliation in first. "Orson is nearer forty than thirty as she said, and he wasn't at Eton either."

"Why would she claim he was?"

"Oh, any excuse to boast; she's like that. No-one really knows that much about his background. It's all a bit shady, if you ask me. And all those foreign business trips are just a cover. He describes himself as a 'self-employed import / export agent'. He's really some sort of major league smuggler, but I don't know quite what it is that he smuggles; something in the realm of art or antiques. You wouldn't have been consuming excise-free wine last night, though I wouldn't put it past Charlotte to slip you a Mickey Finn," she growled.

I had not told Sammie about the blackout and I was definitely not about to, but fortunately she did not probe any further in that area. She went on about Orson. "I couldn't prove anything of course. Just my suspicions built up over years of being viewed as an embarrassment and worse in the house." I got the impression that Sammie thought it would be a good idea if someone checked out Orson's business dealings.

"That's for the police to investigate if they feel so inclined," I said. Marlowe still had at least a part of his mind on the job, more or less.

The Range Rover had company outside the Kerridge house. A white Saab 2+2 was parked where my MG had been the previous night. I pulled in behind so as to allow room for it to leave if necessary. Given that the car sported a personalised number plate of NAD 1 A, I hardly needed Sammie to explain its ownership.

"That's Nadia," said Sammie. "She's reasonable, don't you think? Except for some reason she seems to get on terribly well with Orson. If I didn't know Charlotte so well I'd think she had competition there. I'm surprised to find Nadia visiting when Orson's not here."

Since I had enjoyed little opportunity to decide whether Lady Nadia was reasonable or not, I kept my mouth shut. I didn't need to adopt all of Sammie's prejudices. She got out of the car, dragged out her bag and walked purposefully to the door. Perkins opened it before she got there. He greeted her as warmly as Dracula would greet the arrival of the latest virgin.

"Miss Sammie!" he said, "How pleasant to see you again. May I take your bag? Your room is ready as usual, Miss." Perkins turned his ghastly smile on me. "Good evening, sir. Mrs Kerridge is with Lady Nadia in the library. Please come through. You are expected." He bustled around us without waiting for any responses.

Sammie preceded me into the house, a resolute if fragile figure. As she crossed the threshold she took up the star-like pendant of her necklace and touched it briefly to her forehead.

"Is that a superstition?" I asked.

"What?" She seemed momentarily distracted, then replied, "Oh yes, my lucky charm. Some people have a rabbit's foot, but I always feel that's terribly hard on rabbits, don't you?"

Perkins showed us through into the library. The room was only dimly lit, with the central chandelier extinguished. A fire burned in the grate and the wall sconces were illuminated. There was a perfume resembling joss sticks. At the end of the room, in front of the curtained window, two green wax candles burned in silver candlesticks, one on each side of a small table. The two women stood quietly, seemingly deep in thought. Neither had a drink and there was no sound of conversation as we entered. Fisto the cat sat on a chair behind the table. Mrs Kerridge responded quickly to our arrival.

"Tobias, how nice to see you again," she said, as she crossed the room all smiles to greet us, "And Sammie, my dear, what a surprise. Are you back to stay for a while?"

"I have to go back again to Cambridge in a couple of days," Sammie retorted ungraciously. "But I thought I'd help Toby out with his investigation for a while. We have a mutual interest in mysteries it appears. We both like digging around." She tried to make the last remark sound menacing.

"They do say that when you're in a hole you should stop digging," said Mrs Kerridge. I wasn't sure whether that should be taken as a joke or a threat. "It's really a waste of time for both of you, but you know you're always welcome here my dear. This is still your home after all."

She turned to me with a seductive smile. "Tobias, you met Nadia at lunch yesterday?"

Lady Nadia came forward and took my hand. "And I can't wait to hear what you've discovered." She was dressed in dark green and wore an eye shadow of a similar shade. In the dim light the straight black hair framing her face had a lustrous shimmer.

I didn't want to give too much away about the investigation, but since I had been followed for most of the day and Anthony had overheard my conversation with Mrs Pressley, I thought I should talk in general terms about discovering the curse, comparing the family graves with the family tree, and touring the exhibition.. At the end of my brief account I was conscious that it did not sound much like a day's work.

"The Peabody's were terribly hospitable," I said. "They insisted on giving me lunch and talked interminably about fruit trees and jam. I now consider myself an expert."

Nadia was uninterested in jam and dismissive of curses. I had to assume that she was in league with Michael and Charlotte in trying to put me off the scent. "I don't understand where a curse comes into it," she objected. "I grant you some primitive member of a voodoo cult might die because they believed they would die, but this poor girl lived in an advanced society and she was shot."

"Yes, but she may have been shot by someone who believed in the curse," I suggested.

She smiled. "To believe in a curse you have to be ignorant or crazy. I'm sorry, that's politically incorrect, but I'm right aren't I? I doubt that the people who lived around my home, even two hundred years ago, would have been either."

I had to admit that relating this theory to a sophisticated woman in the last days of the twentieth century I almost embarrassed myself; almost, but not quite. I had seen enough in the last twenty four hours to make me suspend judgement on the supernatural. Lady Nadia was sceptically amused but polite enough not to scoff. The reflected candlelight in her eyes however caught an expression that suggested it was not easy.

"Yes, well, and how was your date with the dishy oarsman?" Mrs Kerridge asked Sammie, abruptly changing the subject.

I realised with alarm that I had forgotten to feed Sammie her alibi for the previous night, but I need not have worried. Like other female members of her family, she could evidently read my mind.

"Oh him; he didn't turn up," she said with annoyance. "The creep! I spent the evening in the college library instead."

Mrs Kerridge flashed me a knowing look. "And here you are wearing a skirt for the first time in living memory, and your mother's necklace too. It suits you, my dear, but you hardly need it here." That seemed an odd remark. Mrs Kerridge herself wore gold jewellery around the house.

"I feel safer with it," said Sammie frostily. "I even sleep in it."

"Heavens, how uncomfortable! Mind you don't strangle yourself!" Mrs Kerridge turned to me. "Tobias, you don't look like a superstitious man who would carry a talisman."

"To be honest, I tend to think luck is something that we make for ourselves," I replied. "Some people go around thinking the worst and having a low opinion of themselves. People like that have more than their share of bad luck; it's as if they bring it upon themselves. I try to do the opposite."

Mrs Kerridge smiled. It was a particularly feline smile, I thought; the sort of smile a Cheshire cat might give when contemplating a Cheshire mouse. "That shows wisdom. Don't you agree, Nadia? Just the sort of man to solve a mystery."

It crossed my mind that she might be referring to the mystery of the previous evening. Perhaps she thought a day of wondering what had actually happened might have preyed upon my mind. Then again, maybe she had told me the truth about it and it hadn't even occurred to her that I wouldn't be able to remember. In either case the best policy was to admit nothing.

"I think Mr. Le Tocq would have made a good spy," Lady Nadia laughed, though whether with me or at me I couldn't really say. "They say the KGB is making a comeback in Russia. Perhaps you could be the new Millennium's answer to James Bond."

I found myself bristling just a little, but I reminded myself that Sammie thought of Nadia as the acceptable face of her family. She didn't need me to make relations with her family any worse.

"He'd need to get a newer car," Sammie managed to get a word in, "and that would be a terrible shame. Now your car, Nadia, that's exactly what a spy ought to drive. Not flashy enough to be noticeable, but powerful enough to make a quick escape if you need to."

Lady Nadia smiled. "I'd have to change my number plate though."

I smiled back at her. "I don't think spies should have their names on their cars, do you?"

"The Russians never did in Vilnius. Mind you there were so many Russians living in Lithuania they hardly needed spies."

She spoke about Russians the way my grandfather spoke about Germans, but in Jersey the occupation was much shorter and without colonisation. Nowadays Jersey welcomes German tourists to look at German-built relics of the war. I rather got the impression that Nadia would welcome a spot of ethnic cleansing back in her homeland.

"Do you ever go back there?" I asked her. "Back to Vilnius?"

"Oh yes," she replied. "Two or three times a year. My family are still there."

"Except your cousin Valentina," said Sammie.

There was the suggestion of a hesitation and then Nadia answered, "Yes, that's right. I have a cousin in America. I stayed with her when I did my Master's in Boston."

"Your accent is rather a give-away of an American education," I said.

She pouted prettily. "Isn't it truly dreadful? You never notice these things happening until it's too late. Even after years in England I seem to be stuck with it."

"What she means is it's terribly sexy and she makes a point of going over to Massachusetts every summer to keep it topped up," Sammie put in. "Now in Boston they know a thing or two about curses." She returned blithely to the subject that I had been happy to leave. "Have you heard of the curse of the Bambino, Toby? The Boston Red Sox haven't won the World Series since they traded Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees in 1918."

"That's another silly superstition," Nadia waved her hand dismissively. "It's just an excuse got up by the Boston media. The truth is they keep losing to better teams. Not that I'm an expert on baseball of course. I'm not much for football either, but I'll hazard a guess that Lincoln City haven't won the cup since 1918 and no-one thinks they need a curse to explain that!"

Our conversation was interrupted by a discreet cough. Perkins stood behind me trying to attract Mrs Kerridge's attention. "Mr. Kerridge was just on the telephone from East Midlands Airport, ma'am. He concluded his business in Antwerp earlier than expected and should be home in time for dinner."

Sammie permitted herself a slight smile. Mrs Kerridge looked less than pleased.

Lady Nadia pushed her hair back from her face with both hands. "I should be on her my back to Borminster."

"I'll see you out," said Mrs Kerridge. "Please excuse me a moment you two."

Sammie waited until the two of them had left the room and then moved quickly across to the door. There was a low murmur of conversation from the hallway and then the front door opened and closed. Sammie came back to the centre of the room.

"I was eavesdropping," she whispered. "Orson wasn't expected until next week; neither Charlotte nor Nadia can understand it!"

"What's so difficult to understand?" I asked in some perplexity.

Before Sammie could respond, Mrs Kerridge re-entered the room. Her features still betrayed a sense of agitation. I assumed she was uncertain how my presence in the house could be explained to her husband. However that was nothing to the expression of astonishment which she registered at Sammie's next remark. My own jaw must have dropped a little as well.

"I didn't want to say this in front of Aunt Nadia," Sammie's eyes sparkled in the candlelight, "but Toby will be sharing my room tonight. I'm sure you understand. Orson won't mind either."

I could have sworn that was relief on Charlotte's face, but she pretended to be shocked. "Sammie you only just met yesterday!" she exclaimed.

By Charlotte's own standards thirty six hours from first encounter to bedroom might be considered slow going, but by my standards twenty four hours from one bedroom to another was pretty brisk, especially since both bedrooms happened to be in the same house.

"It was love at first sight, I suppose." Sammie took my arm as I stood in bemused silence.

"And how exactly do you reconcile that with rushing off to Cambridge for a date last night?"

I wasn't sure whether jealousy might not be contending with panic in Mrs Kerridge's head. After all, she had assured Michael on the phone that she had nothing to fear from Sammie by way of sexual competition.

Seeming to be relishing her adversary's discomfiture, Sammie replied, "That was a fib; I did have an appointment, but it was this morning, at the Family Planning Clinic."

Mrs Kerridge's face registered a mixture of emotions. I had the impression that her outrage was beginning to gain the upper hand. She muttered that she really couldn't have such behaviour under her roof. Considering her own behaviour under the same roof she clearly had problems with hypocrisy as well as jealousy.

"Suit yourself, Charlotte," Sammie delivered the knockout punch. "There are vacancies in hotels all over Lincoln." She looked Charlotte straight in the eye and her aunt's glance wavered a little.

"Mr. Le Tocq, what do you have to say to this?" asked Mrs Kerridge. I noticed that we had suddenly stopped being on first name terms. I was not at all certain what I had to say about anything at that moment, but Sammie didn't wait for me to falter.

"Toby's far too polite to offend his hostess, but he feels as I do," she said firmly. "Now what's it to be Charlotte, do we stay or do we go?" The look I got from Mrs Kerridge would have melted steel.

"I'll get Perkins to move your things," Mrs Kerridge said to me through gritted teeth. "You'll want to freshen up before dinner. Harry should be here by seven thirty."

She strode angrily from the room. Fisto got up from his chair behind the table and stalked out of the room after her.

It took me a moment or two to regain my presence of mind. "You'll forgive me," I said, finding my voice at last, "if I find this rather sudden. I'm not complaining, mind, but you might have mentioned it to me first."

"Don't be silly," urged Sammie, "there's no time for that. Kneel down."

"What?" I looked blankly at her.

"Kneel down!" she insisted. "On the carpet!"

I knelt. I had no idea what was going on. Sammie moved quickly to the green candles and extinguished them; then she came back and knelt right in front of me, inches from my face, removing her necklace as she did so.

"Don't laugh," she said. "This is very serious; we have to be quick. I'll explain later." She placed the ruby pendant against my forehead and then held it in place by pressing her own forehead against mine, at the same time taking both my hands in hers.

Again I felt her touch like an electric shock. Her eyes were closed in concentration, but she breathed quietly and seemed to become more and more relaxed. Her breath fanned my face and I could smell her perfume. It was almost like a kiss. My own eyelids wanted to close. The tip of her nose touched mine. After a short space of time she let go of my hands and took the pendant from between us. She got to her feet and gave me her hand to get up.

"What," I asked in astonishment, "was all that about?".

"Come upstairs," she said. "My room is safe."

"Safe from what?" I wondered. "What exactly is all this mumbo-jumbo?"

"When Fisto went out with Charlotte," she replied patiently, "I thought we might not have time to get to my room and that was why I had to do the protection here in the library. It wasn't ideal with their candles so close but I had no choice."

Without waiting for more protestations she led me quickly from the library and up to a room two doors down the landing from the one which I had occupied the previous night. There was no sign of Perkins or Mrs Kerridge. Sammie switched on the light, shut the door behind us and looked around quickly. The she sighed with relief and sat on the bed smiling.

"Toby you look as if you'd seen a ghost!" she said, with an amused glance.

"That was this morning," I replied, trying hard to regain some composure. "Not that I saw her exactly. What I've just seen, I've no idea. Suppose you explain it to me."

"Toby you're not a fool." Sammie got up off the bed and came over to take my hands again; again I felt the shock. "You must have realised by now what Charlotte is. Maybe you think it's just a joke? Just because people say to you that nobody believes in witchcraft any more it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. And no matter what Mrs Pressley may say, it doesn't lose a fraction of its power over you because you don't believe in it."

I suppose I had known she was going to say something like that, but foreknowledge did not lessen the impact all that much. I stared at her as one might stare at a lunatic. Eventually I found my voice again sufficiently to speak. "Charlotte is a witch?" I asked.

Sammie gave me one of those 'What sort of a stupid question is that?' looks and said nothing.

I tried again. "Are you seriously telling me that Charlotte could harm us by using magic?"

She heard the scepticism in my voice. "Of course I am!" she exclaimed, as though patiently trying to explain the obvious to an ignorant child. "Did you not suspect anything last night? Did nothing unusual happen?"

I was still not inclined to discuss the previous night's events. I had no wish to acquire a reputation for credulity. Alcohol would surely seem to offer a more likely explanation than witchcraft. I avoided the question.

"Why should Charlotte want to harm anybody?" I asked.

Still patiently, but now with urgency in her voice she explained. "Witchcraft thrives on secrecy, Toby. It should be obvious that it doesn't mix too well with private detectives nosing around."

It was my turn to give her a strange look.

"All right, I admit that I'm part of the problem too. Until we turned up together she probably thought she could keep you off track by seducing you. After that she knew it would need black magic rather than white. But I couldn't leave you alone in her house any longer than I had to; you don't know what she's capable of."

It was my turn to take a deep breath. Sammie took it for granted that something sexual would have occurred the previous night. She was remarkably calm about it. I might have been disappointed that she was not jealous had I not been far more concerned that she might be deranged.

I had been shocked but not unhappy by the turn of events thus far. The prospect of a night with Sammie would have been a very satisfactory recompense for the loss of a night with Charlotte, which would in any case have been denied me by the sudden return of Charlotte's husband. But if Sammie was insane then I was not so sure.

With an effort, I made my voice sound as normal as I could in the circumstances. "Run that by me one more time will you?" I said. "What exactly are you talking about and what did you just do downstairs?"

"You heard Charlotte call my mother's ruby a talisman? You heard her say I didn’t need it here? That’s rubbish of course; I need it more here than anywhere. Well, a talisman is a protective charm." She spoke in a matter of fact voice. "My mother had the power, like the rest of the family, but she wouldn't use it except to defend herself. She taught me how to protect myself too. How do you suppose I survived nine years in this house?"

Mentally speaking, it was not altogether clear to me at that moment that Sammie had survived. But her manner was so self-assured and her answers so internally consistent, that, as with Edith Peabody, it seemed best to treat her as rational.

It was still pleasant enough to have been invited to a young lady's bedroom, but I was none too happy with the thought that our retiral thither had been something in the nature of a tactical retreat.

"So why was there such a hurry?" I enquired.

"Oh Toby, what do I have to do to convince you?" Sammie pleaded. "I thought you were going to trust me? You saw Fisto go out with her. Did you ever see a cat like Fisto before? You must know what he is."

I remembered the word that had come to me last night. "A familiar?" I asked.

"Of course," Sammie's relief that I was beginning to show some understanding was almost tangible, "and a very strong one too."

"You have to explain some more," I said. "What exactly is a familiar supposed to do?"

She told me carefully, still as though she were explaining to a small child. "The cat acts as an agent for black magic. It helps a witch focus her power if she does it through an animal close at hand rather than trying to project it over a distance. It also protects her in case the object of her spell is able to counter-attack by reflecting the curse back to its originator. If that happens, the familiar catches the force of the rebound rather than the witch. You'll see," she smiled, "the least Fisto will have tonight is a stomach ache. Charlotte only just found out that I was coming. She would need more time to arrange powerful spells, but whatever she tried she's getting back with interest."

The animal rights lobby would not have been happy with

Sammie's grim satisfaction at inflicting pain on a cat, but I supposed that the unbiased might consider familiars to be a special case. Right now the cat was the least of my worries.

"So," I said, as calmly as I could manage. "Charlotte is a witch. Your whole family are witches. You're a witch yourself."

"I was born with it!" she exclaimed. "Don't make it sound as though I chose it! Did you choose to be the son of David Le Tocq?"

"All right, all right," I said, trying to calm her. "And like your mother you only use witchcraft for defensive purposes. Now forgive me, but you're talking to a detective. If your mother's ruby is such a powerful defence, why did it not protect your parents from the fire in which they were killed?"

Sammie seemed troubled by the recollection, but determined to be patient with me. "Sometimes fires are just fires," she said. "Charlotte and my mother never got on, but they weren't enemies so far as I know. But the ruby would have protected my parents, if they'd had it with them. As it happens they didn't. There was a burglary just before I went away to school. The police recovered mother's jewellery a few weeks later, but by then it was too late."

I still hesitated a little. It seemed to me that protective rubies ought not to be so easily stolen; they ought to have built-in burglar alarms. Suddenly I was an authority on spells? Nevertheless I deliberately followed the sceptic's question with the believer's question. "But you can use the ruby to protect us, even in Charlotte's house?" I asked.

Sammie was a little reassured. "All I know is what Mother taught me," she replied. "I can protect myself and those who are with me. It's harder here than it would be on neutral ground, but I can do it. That's why I needed you in my room tonight. My room got the full book of defensive charms whilst I was living here. I needed a sanctuary; a place that Charlotte would have to leave me alone. I doubt if Charlotte ever comes in here. She'd be very uncomfortable if she did."

When I said nothing, Sammie went on. "Now you think I'm crazy don't you?" Her eyes locked with mine. Was that entreaty or defiance? "I knew you would. I didn't want to tell you. I don't make a habit of telling people, you know."

I sighed. "And there was I convinced that you had fallen for my sex appeal. So you only needed me in your room for my own safety."

"Well not only that," she smiled at last. "Because, you silly man, I really do like you a lot and I could see you were getting yourself deep into trouble that you didn't understand. I tried to warn you, didn't I? I told you Charlotte was no ordinary villain; I was just a little economical with the information that she was a witch – and a red-haired witch at that - that's the worst kind you know?"

Her composure cracked a little as she realised that I was ignorant of even this entry-level piece of occult knowledge.

"Now will you please stop standing there staring at me as though I were some kind of freak? For goodness sake come and sit here and give me a hug."

She led me over to the bed and sat down. "Compared to Charlotte I'm a sparrow on the run from a sparrow hawk. I need all the help I can get."

I sat beside her on the bed and put my arm round her. She put her head on my shoulder and drew me closer. Her hair was still tied back into the pony tail, which had fallen between us like a pillow. Her left hand rested lightly on my right shoulder. She was telling me with her voice that she had to protect me, but with her body that she wanted me to protect her.

I was overwhelmed. She was young, she was beautiful and I was not really hard bitten like Marlowe. She might be neurotic but I figured she was harmless. If there really was witchcraft going on, then I was with King James in thinking that it couldn't hurt to have a witch on my side. It's not the sort of thing you learn from books, is it? Or so I thought at the time.

"You said it wasn't ideal to do the protection with their candles so close. Who exactly were they?" I asked.

"Who do you think?" she said, "Charlotte and Nadia of course."

"Nadia is a witch too? But she's only a member of your family by marriage. I thought you said you had to be born with it."

Sammie sighed. "And do you suppose that only my family is born with it? Catholics marry Catholics, Jews marry Jews and witches marry witches. A normal coven is thirteen so where there's one practitioner of the old religion there are always likely to be more." Sammie was quite matter of fact about it. "I always thought that Nadia was quite a nice witch as witches go. I still do. The spell that they were working when we came in was a money spell; nothing to harm anyone. You could tell by the colour of the candles."

"So Michael is a witch too?" I asked. "Or what do you call it - a warlock?" She nodded. "What about Orson?" I continued. "If he's one too then we're in trouble when he arrives aren't we?"

"No. Charlotte married out. He's a crook but not a warlock," Sammie moved away enough to look at me and shake her head and then hugged me a little closer. "I'm sorry you don't believe me. It would make life much easier if you didn't produce so much negative psychic energy. You could easily learn to protect yourself from the milder sort of spells. If you insist of making me do it all, I shall be exhausted before the night is over."

This time I must have produced positive vibrations. Sammie smiled. "Since you are, so I've been led to believe, a sensible private detective, humour me for the time being and I'll prove it to you when I get the chance."

"Very well," I said, "then if Orson is not a warlock he'll weaken Charlotte. She will find herself with alternative employment tonight."

"Good for you!" Sammie grinned. "Now you're thinking straight!"

"She was worried when she heard he was back. Why doesn't she cast a spell to remove any suspicions he might have about her being unfaithful?"

"It would need a quite impressive spell to persuade him that he'd seen nothing if he caught her with a boyfriend." She looked straight into my eyes. "Charlotte could do it, of course, but it would take a little time. What made her nervous was that he telephoned from the airport; virtually on the doorstep."

"Sammie," I said, "tell me what I have to do to get rid of the negative psychic energy and I shall do it. Are you sure we're all right now? Should we make a quiet exit?"

"Absolutely not," Sammie said firmly. "Witchcraft thrives on self-doubt. You said it yourself downstairs just now. If we allow ourselves to think we can be beaten, then we shall be. You know you couldn't have described the Wicca philosophy better if you'd been a warlock yourself."

"Making our own luck, you mean?"

"Absolutely. Positive psychic energy is all about relaxation. You let the tension flow out of you. You say to yourself, ‘I have the power, I am invincible.’ And, lo and behold, you are."

"As long as you're sure."

"I'm certain. Charlotte knows that I will fight back."

I needed only to move my head a few inches to kiss her gently on the lips. She responded willingly, hungrily. Her tongue flicked my lips and pushed itself gently between my teeth. When she came up for air, she drew back just a little and smiled at me.

I smiled back. "I have the power," I said quietly, "I am invincible."

X - 19:00 Friday 17th December

"Take us the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes."

It is amazing how much positive psychic energy a beautiful blonde can induce in me if she tries hard enough. By the time that Harry Kerridge arrived home I felt I could move mountains. I knew nothing of witchcraft but what I had learned in the last twenty four hours and, even now, I could manage to put aside my scepticism only by virtue of Sammie's evident sincerity. When an exceptionally well educated person, who has displayed no other symptoms of insanity, tells you that witchcraft is a reality, you are more inclined to believe it than might be supposed. Of course it also helps if she looks like Meg Ryan.

I was in the Kerridges' house, evidently once again staying the night and my first night there had not exactly reinforced my rationality. I had little choice but to accept Sammie's guidance for the time being and I was good at adjusting to unfamiliar environments. I knew enough about the Kerridges' lifestyle to handle the evening comfortably on a normal social level at least.

I had also been around the block sufficiently to respond as Sammie wished to her desire to be treated like a woman. I doubted Mrs Kerridge had told me the truth about Sammie's bluestocking tendencies and lack of friends. I found it hard to believe that a girl who looked like Sammie would not be extremely popular. It was entirely credible however that she would not wish to bring her friends home.

Of solid evidence for Mrs Kerridge's witchcraft, I had only the facts that she was an extremely attractive lady with at least one cat, who liked to entertain by candlelight. Even the witchfinders of the seventeenth century might have needed a bit more than that. I did not normally assume that a woman had to be using magic if she chose to get into my bed. Conceivably Sammie's traumatic loss of both parents, followed by a less than enthusiastic adoption by a young and beautiful aunt who found that a teenage "daughter" cramped her style, had left her with paranoid tendencies.

I had no choice but to take a side in this family feud. I knew from the overheard telephone conversation that, for some reason, Mrs Kerridge was not on my side, though she was prepared to make her opposition highly entertaining. (Correction, she had been so prepared until her husband came home and Sammie dropped her bombshell about our sharing a room; exactly how Mrs Kerridge was feeling about me right now was difficult to say.) I decided that I would play the cards that Sammie dealt me. I already knew that she was potentially in some danger and Marlowe has some chivalry. In addition Toby Le Tocq was more than a little smitten.

I promised myself that the next day I would learn more about 'the craft'. There should be no great difficulty. Secretive the old religion might be, but there are always members of covert societies who find it worthwhile for one reason or another to publish revelations. I felt sure that there would be publishers specialising in the occult, through them one might contact researchers if not some practitioners uninvolved in my present case.

It seemed to me that what I needed were guidelines on recognising modern witches. The book had talked about crop failures and so on because those things were important at the time. I thought it improbable that Mrs Kerridge would concern herself with BSE or the yield per hectare of oilseed rape.

Then again, in popular mythology witches were always ugly, poor old hags. Mrs Kerridge was about as far from qualifying as it was possible to imagine, but then so must Margaret Rigg have been. In any case such a picture seemed to me illogical. If a woman did have the power, why should she not use it to make herself alluring and wealthy? If the seventeenth century had not suffered from a collective hysteria about witchcraft, courts would have taken ugliness and poverty as proof positive of incompetence if not innocence. In fact, witch trials were absurd; the mere fact that someone was caught and brought to trial should have testified to innocence.

But there had to be some more discriminating test than good looks and money. I doubted that film stars all owed their success to the craft.

The witch prickers had sought to discover a mark on the body of the accused in which no pain could be felt. In practice this meant that they stuck in enough spikes to desensitise an area of the body and then declared that they had located the mark. My brief opportunity to observe Mrs Kerridge unclothed had, I feared, been taken up with other distractions and was unlikely to be repeated. I remained confident however that there would be some other means of identification, especially since I was not yet convinced that what I was looking for was a witch, as opposed to someone who thought of herself as a witch.

Less than an hour after going upstairs, we heard Orson's car arrive. By that time Sammie was convinced that we were safe to descend to the library again and even to take a drink before dinner.

Whether or not, in the interim, Mrs Kerridge had been boiling toads in cauldrons or muttering incantations to her familiar, she had found time to change into another Dior dress, this time largely red in colour and completely recover her composure. It is not often that a redhead can wear red without looking as though she should have thought better of the idea. Mrs Kerridge could not only wear the colour, but looked ravishing.

There was no mention of sleeping arrangements. She conversed amiably about the weather and complained about the government like anyone else. Fisto however was not in his accustomed place by the fireside. When I enquired after him I was told that he always took his meals in the kitchen. Sammie gave me a knowing look.

Orson came straight in without going first to his room. He was about forty years old, of stocky build, but refined and intelligent in his clean shaven features. He wore a three piece business suit and looked as if he had stepped out of the boardroom rather than an aeroplane followed by a car journey.

Charlotte introduced me as, "Sammie's boyfriend Tobias Le

Tocq; he's a private detective."

His glance never wavered and his handshake was firm and confident. If he was a crook he was a confident one.

Sammie herself he embraced in a fatherly fashion and enquired how her studies were progressing and whether she was still enjoying Cambridge. He then began to talk about me; how long I had been a private detective, when and where I had met Sammie and so on. Within ten minutes he had the advantage of knowing considerably more about me than I knew about him and all without the least appearance of unreasonable curiosity.

"Sammie tells me that you're an art lover, Mr Kerridge?" I said, trying to change the subject.

If Sammie was right about Orson's smuggling, I expected little response. Far from it.

"I am, though I might not necessarily agree with today's art establishment as to what qualifies under that heading. The common man, Mr Le Tocq, who has never received any education in art, knows enough to suspect that so-called installation sculpture, for example, is simply a product manufactured by the talentless for sale to the gullible. Now if you want to see sculpture, show me any between the Renaissance and Rodin. And wood carving. Have you seen the remarkable rood screen at St Winifred's in Borminster?"

"I've only had a chance to see the church from the outside."

"Oh, you must go back. Take the opportunity whilst you're here to see what I can confidently assure you is one of Grinling Gibbons' finest small scale works. Always difficult, don't you agree, for post-Renaissance carpenters to install screens in a Gothic setting? Now in St Winifred's you see the genius of Gibbons. He accepts the style from the setting rather than trying to impose his taste upon the church."

From somewhere I found that I had strong views on a subject that I had no recollection of ever consciously studying. Orson was clearly an enthusiast and in me he somehow detected another. We were soon engrossed in a topic that should have belonged in an obscure university seminar.

At some point I said, "But I would have thought a perpendicular Gothic building like St Winifred's could accommodate a Gibbons screen more easily than, say, a flamboyant Gothic like Rheims? My friends in the jewellery business always tell me you need a plain setting for a truly beautiful stone."

"And flamboyant woodwork looks terrible in a flamboyant setting?" replied Orson. "You're quite right, Tobias. Do you know Charlotte, Tobias and I are going to get along terribly well? He is a man of rare taste."

"Indeed;" she agreed, "his taste in women for example."

I might have winced at the double entendre, but Mrs Kerridge delivered the line without a flicker of nuance and included Sammie in our conversation with a most gracious smile.

In all this time Sammie had spoken only when she was spoken to, but smiled and looked relaxed, as though there was no place she would rather be and no company she enjoyed more. Mrs Kerridge also seemed happy enough to let her husband make most of the conversation. Neither of them had previously been notable for their reticence. It was interesting however that gaze of each was fixed upon the other, rather than looking at whoever was speaking. I wondered if two witches casting mutually antagonistic spells needed to stare at each other like mongoose and snake waiting for the slightest loss of concentration.

We were hardly seated at dinner when the strange behaviour recommenced.

"Look at that," said Sammie, exhibiting a bent silver dessert spoon to the assembled company. "Either Mrs Perkins is becoming heavy handed with the dishwasher, or someone around this house practises telekinesis."

Mrs Kerridge glowered, but whether at an affront to her housekeeping or an attempt to publicise her witchcraft I couldn't tell.

"I think we'll blame Mrs Perkins," Orson laughed. "Spoon bending and such like nonsense are just conjuring tricks. Don't you agree Tobias?"

"I'm not sure that I would know," I said. "How can you tell the difference between a good trick and a genuine paranormal phenomenon?"

"That begs the question," Orson smiled. "Before we can establish a means of distinguishing we must agree that there are two categories to be distinguished."

"Well, we can settle that! Why don't we conduct an experiment right now?" Sammie chimed in.

I hoped no-one noticed my sharp intake of breath. This remark was redolent of young Albert poking the lion with his stick. I could only hope that we were not about to end up as lion meat.

"What do you suggest?" asked Orson in an amused tone. "Should we all concentrate on the pepper pot and try to move it?"

"No, no," Sammie replied emphatically, "if we all concentrate on the same thing, no-one will know who was successful if we do manage to move it. Let's all stand our napkin rings on edge like this," she placed her own napkin ring beside her knife, "and try to roll them away from ourselves."

"That has to be one of the more stupid ways of allowing dinner to get cold," said Mrs Kerridge irritably, glancing at the hovering figure of Perkins. Could she really fear exposure?

"Oh I think we can allow Sammie a little indulgence," said Orson. "She's not home very often these days."

He stood his napkin ring on its edge. I followed suit and Mrs Kerridge reluctantly did the same. "Now what do we do?" asked Orson.

Sammie and her aunt locked eyes again across the table. I was fascinated. It was like game theory or paper, stone and scissors. Sammie wanted to prove the existence of witchcraft. If Mrs Kerridge were a witch, she would wish to avoid exposure. To prove a negative is nearly impossible, but if she had power she would use it to hold all the napkin rings still. Divided power is weaker than focussed power. Might she struggle to concentrate on more than one ring at once? Most likely, ignoring both mine and her husband’s as inconsequential, she would concentrate on her own or on Sammie’s. That meant even if Sammie’s powers were weak she had a fifty-fifty chance of picking the ring that her aunt was neglecting.

Remarkably, the advantage here lay with Sammie who was the one trying to prove a positive. If this little exercise had not been pre-planned, it showed great resourcefulness. The failure of either ring to move would prove nothing, though common sense might suggest it confirmed that no-one was a witch, or that no-one was any good at it. A moving napkin ring however would be strong evidence for the existence of the power, even if not for the identity of the power’s wielder.

"Now we all concentrate on our own ring and try to roll it across the table without touching it, or the table," Sammie replied in answer to Orson's question.

I ignored the instruction; I had no doubt that my ring would remain stationary no matter what I did. I was much more interested in the behaviour of the other players. For several moments nothing at all happened and I thought that Sammie had miscalculated. Maybe she was just paranoid after all. Then, very suddenly, Sammie's napkin ring rolled off the table towards her and fell into her lap.

"Good grief!" she exclaimed, jumping back in alarm so quickly that she overset her chair. As she flung out her hands to arrest her fall by grabbing the table, she accidentally sent the open salt cellar flying across the table to shower its entire contents over Mrs Kerridge. The latter stood up in annoyance and brushed the condiment from her dress.

"You did that on purpose!" she exclaimed.

"Don't make a fuss Charlotte," Orson soothed, "it's only salt."

"How did you manage to make your napkin ring roll backwards?" I asked, mystified.

"I was trying to make it roll forwards," she laughed.

"Well then, my dear, you clearly know telekinesis backwards!" Orson laughed with her.

I was quietly impressed. It was the first piece of evidence to back up Sammie's claims.

Mrs Kerridge petulantly insisted that any further experiment took second place to dinner. The remainder of the meal was uneventful, except for verbal sparring between Sammie and her aunt in the infrequent intervals that Orson allowed in his urbane conversation with me. Our architectural theme resurfaced with references to Troy, Babylon and Luxor, none of which I had ever visited. I had no idea when or where I had come across my information about them, though the memories seemed quite fresh.

When Sammie and I returned to her room later that evening, to find that my belongings had indeed been moved in there, I asked her what had really happened with the napkin rings.

"You saw it Toby," she grinned, "tell me what you saw." There was a pleased and mischievous look on her face.

"Well, for a few moments nothing happened at all," I replied, "then your napkin ring rolled towards you. What else was there to see?"

She gave a little pout that communicated very successfully 'You're supposed to be a detective,' without actually saying the words.

I closed my eyes and pictured the scene; Orson to my left; Charlotte to my right; Sammie across the table from me. Sammie was looking at Charlotte; Charlotte was looking at Sammie; Orson was looking at his napkin ring. I was pretending to look at mine, whilst in reality concentrating my attention across the table and to my right. Sammie said, "Now we all concentrate on our napkin rings." Neither woman wanted to drop her eyes first. Both were like boxers; watching their opponent's face; don't watch his hands; by the time his hands move it's too late; you see the punch in his eyes. Sammie's eyes are steady; Charlotte blinks; immediately Sammie's napkin ring rolls towards her and she throws herself backwards, throwing out a hand and upsetting the salt cellar.

"She blinked," I said.

Sammie beamed. "I knew I wasn't wrong about your powers of observation," she said. "Given the extent of her powers compared to the few skills I have, I regard that blink as a minor triumph, Toby. It was obviously a trivial thing. She knows I can't match her in big league stuff, but that blink said that I had put just enough doubt in her mind about what sort of party tricks I could do."

"You caught her off guard?"

"Yes, because she's never seen any active stuff from me."

"She knew that you'd reflected her spell earlier this evening?"

"Of course."

"She would also know you could not have done that without revealing to me that you were a witch yourself."

"That's right, albeit a pretty feeble one. She'd expect you to think I was nuts. She'd reckon her powers were sufficient to suppress any demonstrations and ensure that nothing remotely unusual happened for the rest of your stay here."

I reflected guiltily that I had still not mentioned the strange incident of the cat in the night time.

"So I set her up," Sammie continued gleefully. "Since I suggested the experiment she was bound to think that I could move a napkin ring. I can't of course."

"I still don't understand how the movement of your napkin ring proves anything about Charlotte's powers."

"Do you not realise what happened?" Sammie asked with a smile. "Think carefully. She wants you to think I'm some kind of freak who believes in all kinds of crazy stuff. If I set up a demonstration and no napkin rings move, I look pretty stupid. And it suits witches just fine when people are sceptical."

"The same way it would suit spies if people didn't believe there was such a thing as espionage?"

"Now you get the idea!"

"So Charlotte's aim is to stop any ring moving," I said. "This much I figured out."

"So if you were in her position, how would you defend?"

"I would start by holding my own ring still. The logical thing is for you to make it look as though she has the power, so if you can move anything you will move hers."

"That's exactly what she did!" Sammie exclaimed. "But she realised there was nothing pulling against her hold, so she thought I must be going to push my own ring. That's when she blinked. She panicked for just a split second and she switched targets so violently that she moved my ring the wrong way before she realised there was no force against her there either."

"So you out-thought what you couldn't out-fight," I applauded.

Sammie smiled. "Charlotte would never have provided you with an open demonstration of her power voluntarily. Since normal people don't believe in magic any more, a victim just puts it down to bad luck. But you can't put telekinesis down to luck; it's a real power."

"But if you expected it," I protested, "why were you so startled?"

"I wasn't," Sammie grinned.

"You nearly fell over backwards!" I insisted. "You sent the salt flying all over Charlotte."

"That wasn't an accident; it was a beautiful direct hit!" She grinned again. "How else was I going to put salt on Charlotte's clothes? I'm glad you thought I acted the part convincingly though. She didn't; that's why she accused me of doing it deliberately."

"I do not understand."

Sammie put her arm round me and gave me a hug. "Poor Toby," she sighed, "this is a lot to take in isn't it?" She led me over to the bed and as we sat down on it she took hold of my hand in both of hers and looked straight into my eyes.

"The truth is," she told me, "witchcraft uses up so much psychic energy that it takes me hours to recover from anything much at all. I used up all the little power that I have defending us against her earlier spell. I gambled that Charlotte didn't know that."

"You mean, for all she knows you spend your time at college doing the magical equivalent of fitness training?"

"Yes, but even so, at her age Charlotte is at the height of her powers. I knew that she would still be strong, despite her earlier spells, and I knew that my little trick would irritate the pants off her. But salt is always very efficacious; just a few grains on the clothes is enough to disable malicious spells for hours. Charlotte got more than enough." Sammie gave a grim little smile of satisfaction. "Trust me. The only nuisance Charlotte could be tonight would be if she tried to spy on us."

"You mean peeping through the keyhole?" I asked. Somehow I didn't see Mrs Kerridge going in for the most primitive form of private detective work.

"No," Sammie hesitated momentarily, as if reluctant to provoke further scepticism on my part. "A powerful witch can move her spirit outside her body and go about without being seen; the only thing is, she has to leave her body lying naked whilst she does this. As you said, with a bit of luck, Orson will keep her distracted."

I can hardly describe my astonishment, not just at the apparent absurdity of Sammie's words, but also at the completely matter of fact way in which she delivered them.

"Unless the central heating in her room is going full blast, I could think of another reason for not lying around naked tonight," I finally managed to say. "But I thought this room was protected anyway?"

"Against her physical body, not her astral one," Sammie replied. "It's harder to keep out an astral body, but not so important because she can't really do anything in that state except watch."

I felt that here at least was something on which I was qualified to speak. "Well I know a few things about snooping devices. There are two ways to deal with them; you find them and fix them, or you put on the show that you want the watcher to see."

"You have to be good to find a disembodied witch. I've detected Charlotte's presence sometimes when she's been careless, but I'm sure there've been many more times when I've missed her. You get a sort of feeling that you can't explain. There's no reason to be uneasy and yet you are."

"I shouldn't like to think that every time I felt like that it was because there was a witch floating around without her body."

Sammie pouted. "I despair of ever getting you to take this seriously."

"I am perfectly serious and also practical," I rejoined. "If you can't find the camera you have to decide what you want the spy to see."

"Well that's easy," said Sammie. "I want her to see the two of us in bed together."

"Now who's not being serious?" I demanded.

"Why not?" She looked offended. "Don't you want to?"

"I'm not sure that you really want to. Making an impression on Charlotte is one thing, but what you really want for yourself is another matter."

Sammie slid into my arms and pressed her body tightly against mine. "What I really want for myself is the only thing I have in mind at the moment," she whispered, "if Charlotte comes snooping and sees us, that's just a bonus."

There was no further need for words. Of course, I should point out that his sort of thing happened to Marlowe all the time. By the time we lay together across the bed, the floor was littered with discarded clothing and I had stopped worrying whether a disembodied Mrs Kerridge was watching.

At first I thought that Sammie made love like no woman I had ever known; then some vague memory floated around my brain, but I was too taken up by the present to concern myself in the slightest with the source of the memory.

At times she clung to me so tightly that I could scarcely move, wrapping legs and arms around me in a fierce embrace, like someone who has been celibate for years. I may have flattered myself that ladies rarely complained, but Sammie became ecstatic.

The electricity between us consumed me till I lost all sense of myself; I disappeared into a throbbing vortex of pleasure that went on and on, long beyond any normal endurance; a maelstrom of sensation that must surely have swept both of us into oblivion had she not climaxed violently; arching upwards towards me, her head thrown right back over the edge of the bed; eyes staring at the opposite wall; her arms flung wide on each side of her. I was speechless, but as the orgasm left her she took me in her arms again.

"Are you sure your name is Tobias?" she breathed.

"So my parents told me," I gasped. "What about you? You weren't christened Sammie, I expect?"

"I wasn't christened," she replied.

After that we slept through until morning, with no interruptions from cats, or, so far as I was aware, any other creature.

When I awoke it was already daylight; Sammie still slept, blonde hair tousled and a strand or two across her face. In sleep she looked very young.

I got up and went to the bathroom and on the way back I collected the strewn clothes and folded them over two separate chairs. As I picked up Sammie's red jacket, a piece of paper fell out of an inside breast pocket; it was just a small square of thick vellum folded in two. The curtains of Sammie's room were unlined and the morning light was quite strong; I could plainly see that the square had been cut out with scissors around the outline of a square drawn in what I took at the time to be red ink.

Written in slightly blurred red letters inside the square were the words: "Sammie Le Tocq."

XI - 09:15 Saturday 18th December

"And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh."

Emanuel Loder was a small, bespectacled man of middle age and thinning hair, who gave an impression of being permanently harassed. His nose twitched like a rabbit on the lookout for foxes and his eyes seemed rarely to concentrate on one of his visitors, but were for ever darting from one of us to the other.

Granted, that did not involve a great change of focus, since Sammie was jammed tightly against me on a very small settee. She held my right hand as she exchanged historical expertise with the professor; we probably resembled honeymooners more than detectives. Professor Loder smiled benignly on us in the way that people do on lovers.

There was apparently no Mrs Loder. The professor had never married and filled all his spare time with historical research. His small house however, was clean and tidy, if one discounted the large number of books which occupied chairs, coffee tables and window ledges as well as the numerous bookshelves. Since it was a Saturday and out of term time, we had found him at home and prised him from his study to talk about how we might track down Victoria Delabor.

I had carried with me the book which I had been loaned by Mrs Pressley, in an effort to make a good impression. The book barely mentioned the Delabors. The landowners that he had written about were old established Lincolnshire families, contrasting lifestyles in 1800 with those of 1900.

"The nineteenth century was a century of the most dramatic social change," he explained. "We should remember that the Lincolnshire of 1800 was hardly altered from the Middle Ages; against that background change was dramatic. Twentieth Century man, by contrast, grew up with rapid change and we never really expect anything else. We have lost our capacity to be surprised, don't you feel?" he asked.

It was true enough that I was never greatly surprised by continuing technological progress, but human beings are a different matter. Three women: Sammie, Charlotte and Edith Peabody had each in her different way managed to astonish me in the last couple of days

"Our problem is specific to my family, professor," said Sammie. "Where do we start looking for Victoria Delabor, who was my mother's great aunt? All we have is a date of birth; there's no record of her marriage or death in the parish records."

"Well, all that tells you is that she didn't marry or die here," the professor replied. "If you could get access to Census data you might find her somewhere else in the country. That would be very slow, of course. One day soon all this data will be computerised, but for the present it's still a matter of wading through paper."

"We don't have a lot of time," said Sammie.

"Well, in your case I would expect to find family papers. Many land-owning families have swathes of old documents that have never been properly sorted. The Victorians were great letter writers, for example. The postal service was so good that it encouraged them to write a lot. Do you know, at one time a resident of London could write a letter to a friend in another borough, receive a reply and send off a reply to that reply, all on the same day!"

"I can't imagine that on paper," I said. I would have been interested to learn how such a service was organised, but as Sammie said, time pressed.

"I'm sure if you start at Borminster Hall you'll find something," said the professor. "I expect it's full of records of one kind or another. In fact, since I'm at a loose end, I'll come and help you if you like, though I have to say that this sort of investigation can take weeks."

Sammie did not explain why it should be urgent to trace a long dead relative. Borrowing Professor Loder's telephone, she called her uncle. The phone was answered by Anthony, which caused her to pull a face. Within a few minutes she had established that a disused servant's room on the top floor was full of old boxes of papers. "And cobwebs and spiders, he said. What a wimp!" She put the receiver down too heavily for a borrowed phone.

"If it's only cobwebs and spiders we have very few problems," Professor Loder said. "I have occasionally felt the need to equip myself with devices to discourage rather larger nuisances."

So our plans for the day were settled; we arranged to pick up the professor after first returning to Lincoln to collect Sammie's car. That would also allow me to contact Carl Hartinski.

On the way the MG's heater suddenly started to work.

Sammie's Mini was still where she had left it. I thought it discreet to refrain from enquiring further into its unstealability.

XII - 10:45 Saturday 18th December

"I will rise now and go about the city in the streets,"

Sammie set off in the Mini to collect the professor, arranging to meet me at the Hall. I found a telephone and called Carl. He worked from home and was not usually difficult to contact. Sure enough he answered the phone at the second ring and was pleased to hear from me.

"Toby!" he exclaimed. "You've sent me an interesting case for a change. There are developments of style between the two documents, but unquestionably both were written by the same person. Is that what you wanted to hear, eh?" There was a chuckle in his voice and that, combined with the Slav accent that decades of British residence had not erased, made it sound as though I was making a seasonal call to Santa Claus.

"What exactly do you mean by developments of style, Carl?" I asked.

"None of us is absolutely consistent in our handwriting, Toby," he explained. "It changes with our mood; when we are tired; when we have been writing for a long time and so on. However, there are idiosyncrasies of style which are always detectable, although they themselves may also vary a little."

"I always have trouble writing my signature consistently on cheques," I agreed.

"Toby, you have trouble writing your signature on cheques at all," Carl expostulated

"I promise to practise signing cheques more quickly if you explain."

"I'll believe it when I see it in the post. But in short, the second note is how you would expect the writing of the original author to age; a more mature version of the same hand. The first document was written by an extremely well educated but very young woman. The influence of the schoolroom is still quite clear. The writer has not had time either to become less careful or fully to develop her own independence. The second document was written by the same woman, but she is much older; decades older I should say. She is perhaps fifty years old or more."

"This is important to me. Carl," I said. "Is there any chance of the second piece being a forgery?"

"None whatever!" He responded, annoyed. "If there was such a chance I would say so. This is why you pay me – when you get round to it!."

"I've already promised, Carl."

"Hmph! I can't prove beyond doubt that no-one could reproduce an eighteenth century hand with the variation that I've described, but at twelve million or so to one, the odds on winning the Lottery are probably shorter."

"A high level of probability is all that I really require here."

"Then consider the evidence my young friend," Carl proceeded. "The writer is naturally left handed, for example."

"The writer of the second one claimed to be naturally right handed."

"Quite impossible. Even ambidextrous writers reveal to the expert which is their preferred hand. This writer was naturally left handed without a shadow of a doubt."

I thanked Carl and wandered back to my car in an abstracted mood. My credulity had been stretched by the past day or so. If I was to accept witches as real, not to mention numerous, it did not seem much more unreasonable to believe in messages from beyond the grave. Here it seemed was a contemporary, if not actually a witness, of the events that I had come to investigate.

Then I thought of Sammie's remark about a witch's ability to go about disembodied. She had said that a disembodied witch couldn't do anything but watch, but maybe Sammie just didn't know what a really powerful witch could do? The ease of communication that I had witnessed certainly fitted more readily with the living than with the dead. Could a witch control another person's hand and make it capable of the finesse of a master forger? Was it conceivable that Victoria was a red herring that Charlotte, or some other, actually wanted me to pursue?

I decided to act upon my earlier resolution to research witchcraft in general. It was not that I disbelieved Sammie, but I felt sure she was no more than a dabbler; I didn't like to offend her by questioning her knowledge directly. Since I was in a city of reasonable size, there must, I thought, be a chance of finding an occult bookshop and I should not be delayed by more than half an hour in my rendezvous with Sammie and the professor. I could make some sort of excuse.

Having reached this decision, I reversed my route and returned to the telephone to contact Mrs Pressley, hoping to obtain the name of a local bookshop or publisher. My sudden change of direction caught out Hooray, or Anthony, who dodged self consciously into a shop doorway.

He must have left the Hall straight after Sammie's phone call; but if so my attention had been distracted on the drive back to Lincoln, because I had not once caught sight of the Mercedes in my rear view mirror. Marlowe told me that I was in danger of becoming a romantic fool and needed to wake up.

The inimitable voice of Mrs Pressley seemed hardly to need the telephone. I held the receiver a foot away from my ear. She recommended a book shop in the town where occult publications might be available. As a result of this loudspeaker announcement half of Borminster must have learned what I was looking into.

XIII - 11:15 Saturday 18th December

"*Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke?*"

Following Mrs Pressley's directions to a narrow back alley, I located a shop which looked as though it might have survived almost unaltered since Dickens' days. The display window was small-paned and fronted with alternate bull's-eye and plain glass, which made it difficult to get a clear view of the books and pamphlets within.

The sign above the door, painted in gold letters of a Gothic script upon a green background, read 'R.Thurles - Antiquarian Bookseller'. The door as it opened struck a real brass bell which hung on a spring just inside and which jumped about noisily but excited no immediate response from the seemingly deserted interior of the shop. I began to look around the shelves.

Not all the publications were old. There were shelves of new books, mostly to do with art and antiques. Below these, I found a shelf of modern writings on the occult, together with a sign directing me to a category of antiquarian books on similar topics. Several of the new books emanated from the same publishing house and displayed lists of further titles. The flyleaves invited those who might be interested in contributing further work in this area to contact the publisher; I was in the process of noting down the address when I realised that I was standing in it. The printing press must have occupied another part of the building.

A number of the modern books were actually do-it-yourself guides to witchcraft. One was literally a book of spells for today's novices in the craft. I chuckled to see chapter headings such as 'Success in Love' and 'Success with Money'; on the face of it looking as though they would not have been out of place in the pages of a women's magazine. I had read only a few lines when I was disturbed by a quiet voice from behind me.

"You are interested in witchcraft?"

This was the second time I had been asked that question in such circumstances. My interlocutor was a man of advanced years, with white hair, thinning on top and an impressive set of whiskers. His skin was brown and his face wrinkled, but his eyes twinkled with amusement and the expression suggested an alert and intelligent mind. He wore a cardigan over a striped shirt with a tie, a pair of corduroy trousers and brown suede shoes.

"Until a few days ago," I replied carefully, "I thought witchcraft was a historical curiosity. Now I'm not so sure. Might you be Mr. Thurles?"

"I might," he answered quietly. "Might I enquire who wants to know?"

"Tobias Le Tocq," I told him, "I'm a private investigator."

He seemed not the least surprised. This is not normal. When did you last meet a private investigator? I mean meet one, as opposed to watching one on television? Most people derive their entire knowledge of the industry second hand. That means most people react with surprise, normally followed by remarks about your not being Belgian, not having a dirty raincoat and so on; exactly the sort of remarks in fact that had been addressed to me by Sammie when I had first met her in Borminster Hall. Thurles did not make any of the usual remarks.

"Good Morning Tobias, I'm Raphael," he replied.

So we were instantly on first name terms. You have to know the story of my namesake, the original Tobias, to know why his introduction rattled my cage just a little. As an in-joke it makes several assumptions; I doubt that everyone named Tobias realises that they are named after the eponymous hero of one of the books of the Apocrypha; a youth who was guided on his travels by the Archangel Raphael disguised as an ordinary man. Well Thurles certainly looked like an ordinary man, if a slightly old fashioned and eccentric one. On the other hand it is not my experience that old people make a habit of inviting total strangers to call them by their Christian names. Had angels taken to wearing corduroy?

Well, ‘non angli sed angeli’ as Pope Gregory said; which being roughly translated means you can’t tell an Englishman from an angel at the best of times; he evidently had never met a Millwall supporter. However, celestial being or bookseller, Raphael was waiting to discover what I wanted to know. I thought I’d better come straight out with it.

"I need someone to explain to me why an otherwise sane and well adjusted young lady seems to believe that witchcraft is a perfectly normal practice," I said decisively.

For a moment Raphael let my words hang in the air between us, then his eyes narrowed just a little. "Why do you say, 'otherwise sane,' Tobias? Do you imply that a belief in witchcraft should be equated with insanity?"

"Devil worship never struck me as an activity for the mentally stable."

"Devil worship?" he enquired. "I thought you said the young lady believed in witchcraft?"

I was perplexed. "Are they not the same thing?" I asked.

"They appear similar only to someone who has been thoroughly indoctrinated in a primitive Christian tradition," he said.

So that included me I supposed. It is, or should be, however, a privilege accorded to old age and / or angels to expose the ignorance of youth.

"You have me at a disadvantage, Raphael," I said. "Until I met this girl my knowledge of witchcraft was gleaned entirely from the press. Would you mind setting me straight?"

The old man was happy to oblige. "The Judaic Devil, or Satan, is not one of the traditional deities of witchcraft," he said. "How could he be? When the missionaries first brought Christianity to Britain, witchcraft was already practised and had been for centuries. It was the Christians who found it convenient to identify the old religion with the Antichrist. They after all saw Satan as the source of all evil and naturally they regarded a religion other than Christianity as evil."

"I see."

"Have you noticed how Satan is traditionally depicted as an amalgam of pagan deities? Pan's legs, Poseidon's trident and so on?"

"But from what I've read about mediaeval witch trials," I persisted, "the accused regularly confessed to being in league with the Devil."

"Under torture people confess to anything, don't they?" Raphael shook his head sadly. "Satanists are not witches. Their motivation is not so much to worship Satan as to shock their fellow men. Satanism is just Christianity with inverted moral standards; a bogus religion followed by the ignorant."

He looked at me carefully, seeking to judge my reaction. Seeming to find what he saw acceptable, he asked if I would like to come through to his office at the back of the shop for a cup of tea.

I assumed that customers were rare or maybe a Raphael did not meet a Tobias every day. It was going to delay my rendezvous with Sammie, but I reasoned that two historians really needed little help from the likes of me when analysing documents and I might have to wait a long time for a conversation with another expert on the subject of witchcraft.

I found myself seated in a small room, dimly illuminated by a small window set high in the rear wall. More shelves of books and several of box-files lined the walls. The room smelled a little musty. A sixty watt bulb added little to the light, but cast shadows around the room even in the daylight. Raphael created enough space on a cluttered desk for a pair of cups and then busied himself with kettle and teapot; angels evidently having enough in common with Englishmen to favour Darjeeling.

"Genuine witchcraft, Tobias," he began, "is about feeling good about oneself and having power over things. By contrast modern Christianity has become a dependency culture; the worshipper is supposed to place his faith in higher powers." This seemed to knock my angel fantasies on the head; as a general rule one wouldn't expect the consigliere of a Mafia Don to go about criticising the Cosa Nostra.

"I find no difficulty in believing that your young lady friend is well adjusted; witches usually are. To practise the craft safely requires self-confidence. Nervous people frighten themselves; most of them give up quickly; occasionally they do themselves harm by lacking the moral strength to control the forces that they unleash."

"You sound as if you have met a great many witches," I said.

"I have observed the occult for many years. I have never practised it myself."

I was relieved. There was already a sufficiency of witches in this case.

"Some people say that the craft can be acquired by anyone who seeks it," he continued. "Such claims are mistaken. Oh, one may dabble in the fringes of white magic, but that is not a sensible thing to do. To have real power one must be born to it; it descends in the blood, tracing back to a pre-Christian hereditary priesthood."

His statement reinforced Sammie's contention that witchcraft ran in her family.

"You spoke about forces," I said. "What forces do you mean?"

"There are many forces in the universe, Tobias." Raphael poured hot water into the teapot. "The human mind for example has far more psychic power than civilised man imagines. The ancients could harness that power in ways that modern man has forgotten." He smiled. "There are entertainers today who have recovered perhaps one percent of the power of the mind; they satisfy themselves with silly tricks like bending spoons." Now he actually chuckled. "A Zoroastrian adept would not have taken on an apprentice whose raw power was insufficient to break a pot without touching it."

If consigliere don't criticise their Don, they certainly don't go around applauding the yakuza. Yet it was odd that Raphael spoke like a witness rather than someone who had read books. I had spoken to hundreds of witnesses and many who had falsely claimed to be witnesses; any detective worth his salt must develop a reliable faculty for telling one from the other. I had also spoken to many experts such as Carl. Experts speaking of things that they have learned speak differently than when speaking of things that they have experienced. Raphael was not speaking like an expert.

If further proof were needed that I had gone quite mad, then to find myself even entertaining the possibility that I was talking to a supernatural being would probably have qualified. I pushed the thought aside with annoyance.

"So," I observed, "with a little of this power you can go on the stage, but with a lot of it you don't need to?"

Raphael smiled. "Why expose oneself to a potentially hostile public when one can achieve one's desires in secret? But the power of the mind is only one force. There are forces of the air, of the rocks and of the seas; spirits that were old when humankind was young. Some men have called them gods and others demons. Myths and legends usually evolved around a grain of truth."

I rather fancied that evidence for this claim would be in short supply. Short of meeting a demon myself I would have to take Raphael's word for their existence. He poured out the tea and offered me a cup.

"Do witches use words to control a power, Raphael?" I asked. "Is this what I would call a magic spell?"

"Any exercise of magical power may be described as a spell," Raphael replied. "Specifically the incantation of words is called a cantrip. Now surely you don't need me to explain how words spoken in the right context by the right person can control others? A reprimand from a parent or teacher will quell a naughty child; an order from an officer directs soldiers in battle and so on."

"But the same words spoken by someone else will be ignored," I added.

"Exactly," Raphael acknowledged. "One could not recite a cantrip and expect obedience from spirits that one did not know." He paused again and smiled. "In order to gain control of these powers you must show yourself greater than they."

"Can you tell me about witches turning themselves into animals?" I asked. "That seems to be a different sort of power."

"Not really, just an extension of the power of mind over matter. There was a lot of hysterical nonsense in the Middle Ages. Superstitious people believed that witches could fly on broomsticks, or sail the sea in sieves. Well they might very well have been able to do so," he gestured impatiently, "but nobody stopped to ask why they should want to. If you can make things fly, why settle for a broomstick? And why waste psychic energy floating a sieve when you could use a boat and save your power for something sensible? Now shape shifting has some point; it would be good camouflage if you wanted to spy on someone, for example. Yes, Tobias, it can be done, but witches of such great power are few and far between."

"What about going about disembodied?" I asked. "Is that possible too?"

"Possible, but hardly advantageous," he replied. "A disembodied witch can exercise no powers. Moreover, she must leave her body naked and vulnerable; and afterwards her spirit must return to the place where she left her body. Shape-shifting allows you to move from place to place unsuspected and re-materialise your body at another location."

"If these powers are so great, how did most men come to forget about them?"

He paused and looked at me acutely; there was a twinkle in his eye and the wrinkled old face was alive with expression.

"Most civilised people scoff because they have lost touch with the powers of nature. Man built an unnatural environment for himself using science. Scientists did not keep to themselves the powers that they discovered. They allowed everyone to use them. That made scientists more popular than priests, so now man believes only in science."

"But since the vast majority of men are not scientists," I said, "today we accept what we are told by scientists in the same way that our ancestors accepted what they were told by priests."

Raphael nodded happily. He took a sip of his tea. "Tell me, does your young lady claim to be able to turn herself into an animal?"

"Not at all," I replied hastily, "She says she only knows a few purely defensive spells."

"Do not tell her that you have been to see me; she may feel that her confidence has been betrayed. I would suggest particular caution over the next two weeks. This is a special time for witches."

"You mean the Millennium?" I queried. "Why that should be special to a non-Christian? I've read that the end of a century is when witches traditionally renew their contracts with the Devil, but you're saying they don't worship the Devil."

"Witchcraft is able to absorb any power for its own." Raphael replied. "A hundred generations of Christians have invested our calendar with great natural forces. It doesn't matter that it is an inaccurate piece of timekeeping from a date which is not known with any precision; what matters is the energy that all this belief has built up. The end of any century focuses this power; the end of a Millennium multiplies it."

"And can it be accessed by human sacrifice?" I asked.

Raphael looked grave. "Are you ready for what you will discover?" He rose from his chair, seeming strangely taller than when he had sat down.

"From what I know already, I'm afraid there may be a murder planned," I said. "I don't know by whom, but I do know that there are only a limited number of possible victims."

"And is one of them your young lady friend?"

"She could be," I agreed.

"Tobias, the sacrifice of a witch has only one possible objective; the discovery of the Great Grimoire." He moved in front of the window. At that moment a bright shaft of sunlight illumined the room and framed his silhouette with gold.

"The great grim what?" I asked.

"Grimoire, a magical book ... a book of spells if you like. There are several; some contain magic which could be dangerous in the wrong hands. None however holds the keys to such powers as those of the Great Grimoire."

"I assume you don’t have of a copy of this Great Grimoire?" I asked.

"No-one has a copy," he said. "Oh, there are a number of works that bear this title; they are, without exception, shallow forgeries of relatively recent date. The work itself has been lost since one thousand BC."

"Lost for three thousand years? Isn’t that a bit like saying the hanging gardens of Babylon are lost? You mean it doesn’t exist."

"The hanging gardens were destroyed long ago, The Grimoire is indestructible. It once belonged to Solomon; hence its other name *Clavicula Solomonis*, the Keys of Solomon." He gave me a piercing look.

"I can’t say that I know much about Solomon," I replied.

"No?" Raphael mused. "But you know of his legendary wisdom. Solomon used the Grimoire wisely, at least when he was a young man." Raphael smiled sadly as though in recollection. "But fearing that his successor could not safely wield similar forces, he hid it. There have been many efforts to locate it, always unsuccessful, sometimes disastrous."

"How exactly did a book get this sort of power?" I asked. "A book is something man-made, not a natural force."

"Solomon was not an ordinary man," he replied, "and this is not an ordinary book. Have you read Jeremiah, Tobias? Do you know about the fire of Moloch?"

I was shocked. That thought had crossed my mind several times in the past couple of days. "Baal worship?" I asked.

"The demon Baal-Hadad," Raphael nodded, "who was worshipped as a god, was enslaved by Solomon and made guardian of the Great Grimoire. Such was the power that Solomon wielded."

"A demon? One of these forces that we talked about?"

"Not just one of them," Raphael replied, "though there are many baals, or baalim to speak strictly. The word baal itself simply means ‘lord’. They are all malignant demons. As part of their worship, first born sons were sacrificed through Moloch; second born sons were named in honour of the local baal: Baal-shazar or Hann-i-baal for example." He stressed the double ‘a’ for my benefit. "But Baal- Hadad is the overlord of all baalim; King of the demons, but bound himself by Solomon."

"I take it none of these Baal worshippers got hold of the book?" I asked.

"They were unsuccessful in obtaining the Grimoire," Raphael replied gravely, "but successful in corrupting the malleable. When the Jews were under the heel of foreign invaders they themselves sometimes confused Yahweh with Baal and offered him human sacrifice; that’s what Jeremiah was talking about. As generation succeeded generation, the story became transformed in the re-telling until it was believed that Baal controlled the Grimoire and could release it to anyone who pleased him."

"They were wrong about that."

"Partly wrong. Baal was securely bound by Solomon’s magic, but Solomon did not wish the knowledge to be lost for ever. He provided for a gateway every thousand years, which the right successor could open." He paused and a little smile played about his lips. "The magi who attended upon the birth of Jesus knew that He might have opened the gateway, but ...." Raphael sighed, "... of course he refused. Anti-Roman zealots like Judas felt betrayed."

"Jesus was a thousand years after Solomon. Did the witches of 1000 AD have another go?"

"Indeed they did. By this time they were quite unsure of the ritual itself. They believed that human deaths were required to unlock the spells."

"And today," I said, "witches believe that one of their own must be sacrificed?"

He frowned darkly. "You will need much wisdom. There is little time to prepare. There are more witches involved here in Lincoln than you suspect and they are closer to success than anyone else in the world."

"I can think of more likely places," I said.

"You are wrong to think so," he replied. "Lincoln, or more specifically Borminster, is the correct location for this Millennium. It is a matter of the alignment of forces."

He looked directly at me, as though testing me. "You could simply take the young lady away. The ritual requires the victim to pass through Moloch here. She will be safe if she simply avoids this place."

"But someone else might be murdered instead. And the *Clavicula Solomonis*, if it exists, can't be allowed to fall into the wrong hands."

"It is unlikely to fall into anyone's hands." Raphael declared. "Not only must the ritual be performed correctly, but it must be performed by an acceptable person; The Chosen of Solomon."

"And they don't know who this chosen person is?"

"They seek but they have not yet found," Raphael replied. "A witch's diary dating from the early nineteenth century once passed through this shop. It recorded aspects of the search."

"Witches keep diaries to keep track of their spells, I suppose?"

"Indeed. Such documents rarely come to light for obvious reasons. This one wrote about the Rigg family centenary ritual and noted that George was studying ancient grimoires in an attempt to identify The Chosen of Solomon."

"I don't suppose that you still have this diary?"

"It was sold some years ago to a local person," he conceded. "It would not have been possible to refuse, you understand; the buyer knew that Thurles had the book in his possession; in any case he was made a very reasonable commercial offer."

The old man had just referred to himself in the third person. I followed suit. "Did Thurles by any chance come by it originally in a job lot of books from a house that had been damaged by fire?" I asked.

Raphael nodded. The beginnings of a smile flickered around his lips.

"Not all witches are on the same side, are they?" I observed.

It seemed Raphael had no more to tell me and it was time to move on. I asked him to sell me the book I was holding and supply me with a carrier bag. Since I was being followed it wouldn't do for me to be in the shop for so long and come out empty handed. We went back through to the front of the shop. As I was about to leave, I had a further thought.

"One last question, Raphael," I said. "What would it mean if a witch wrote her first name and a man's last name in red ink on a piece of thick paper and then drew a square around the names?"

"Are you sure it was red ink?" Raphael smiled. "If a witch writes her would-be married name in her blood on parchment and then carries the square close to her heart, the poor man is hers for ever; usually she will employ such a powerful spell only if she fears that she may lose the man to some other woman."

"Or some other witch," I said.

I shook hands with Raphael and stepped outside into the wintry sunlight. As I walked away I did not once look back to check that the shop was still there.

XIV - 12:00 Saturday 18th December

"A good name is better than fine perfume"

My scepticism about the supernatural seemed to have been suspended. Sammie and Raphael spoke about witchcraft as though it were a fact and, since both agreed that a disembodied witch could exercise no powers, I had no longer an alternative explanation for Edith Peabody's automatic writing. Although initially attracted by Mrs Pressley's suggestion that the power of a curse lay in the mind of the victim, I was now convinced that there was more to it.

As to Sammie's apparent use upon me of a love spell, I had no means of knowing how much of what I felt for her was purely natural chemistry. Could any woman truthfully claim never to have made the slightest attempt to manipulate a man by whatever means she had at her disposal? Nevertheless, if she had practised a love spell, then her contention that she only knew a few defensive spells inherited from her mother was not strictly true. I was still thinking enough like a detective to wonder what else she might have done.

Was I falling in love with a witch? Since I already knew that Sammie dabbled in white magic, should it matter to me if she did more? She might, after all, in other circumstances have concealed even this knowledge from me; an emergency had forced her hand and she had clearly feared that I would recoil from her. In reality, I had been more intrigued than repelled. I suppose an average reasonable man would have put a lot of distance between himself and this whole family; but then he would have had to give up Sammie.

As I arrived back where I had parked the MG, I was surprised to find a pretty dark haired young woman sitting on the bonnet. If it had been a man or a kid doing this I would have been annoyed; the young woman however did not look to be doing any damage and was even more decorative than the car. She got up with a smile, gave me a hug and kissed me on the cheek. As her lips were close to my ear she said quietly, "This is for the benefit of the guy who's following you; don't look surprised; I'm D.S. Silver, Fine Arts and Antiques Squad."

I have to say that in my experience not many police officers introduce themselves with a kiss, but I rated it some distance ahead of "'Ello, 'ello, what's all this then?" I pride myself on rapid adjustment to circumstances; I hugged her back and gave her a kiss in return. She was a real trouper and never turned a hair, though she gave me an amused glance.

"Am I needed to help with your enquiries?" I grinned.

D.S. Silver contrived to continue looking pleased. "Come and have a coffee," she said. "I take it you knew you were being followed?"

"I am a detective too," I replied. "I will go for a coffee, provided you slip me a sight of your warrant card. Hide it in a napkin."

I was already very late and another fifteen minutes was unlikely to make much difference; I didn't want Anthony, or rather his employer, to know that I was being contacted by the police any more than D.S. Silver, apparently, wanted to announce her identity to him. We made our way to the 'Witch's Cauldron.'

"Do you know who is following you?" she asked as we installed ourselves at a table as far from the window as possible.

The warrant card was passed and returned surreptitiously.

"A gentleman by the name of Anthony Delabor."

"That's right," said D.S. Silver. "Do you know why?"

"Not really, though I am beginning to entertain a notion that he belongs to a most peculiar family."

"Right again," D.S. Silver nodded. "You've had no contact with them before and you're clean; I've had you checked out. Your local nick regards you as quite tolerable as gumshoes go." D.S.

Silver had a very attractive smile.

"Praise indeed!" I affected astonishment. "Did I walk into something I shouldn't have? Do you want to explain to me why we went to so much trouble out in the street for Anthony's benefit?"

"You would maybe have preferred me to turn up in a panda with a couple of woodentops?" she smiled. "I don't know what you're investigating and I have no interest in blowing your cover."

Now by the standards of the Old Bill this counted as very special consideration; your average plod jumps in with both feet and apologises afterwards if he can be bothered. However one would have needed to be unobservant indeed to mistake the curvaceous D.S. Silver for your average plod. I explained my interest in the Borminster body.

"So far as I know that doesn't even interest the local boys in blue, much less the Fine Arts and Antiques Squad. On the basis of what I've heard, however, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that Harry Kerridge is a rather more live candidate for your interest."

"Your sources are good," she acknowledged. "Perhaps you could introduce me to them?" She hardly needed to read my expression for an answer to that suggestion. "Well then, I need to ask you some questions about your hosts, but I need your word that you won't pass any information about my enquiry back to them."

"I don't normally repay people's hospitality by grassing them to the constabulary," I told her.

"Another thing your local nick mentioned was that your activities have frequently sailed quite close to the legal wind." D.S. Silver was still smiling, but now it looked more like the way the office cat looked at mice. The thought of the cat put into my head the extraneous fact that Fisto had still not put in an appearance since last night. "From time to time the inexplicable thought enters their collective heads that if they bust you often enough to make your clients leery you might even go out of business and stop being a nuisance." This is the Bill's standard threat and though I had heard it several times before it doesn't make it any the less effective.

"You twisted my arm," I conceded, "You have my word in respect of my hosts." It did not seem unreasonable. I knew that, for whatever reason, Mrs Kerridge and her brother did not have my best interests at heart. I wasn't sure about Harry.

D.S. Silver understood my guarded statement exactly as I had intended. "I'm not interested in Semiramis," she smiled again.

"You're not interested in who?"

"Semiramis Chalmers, your girlfriend."

"Ah!" I gulped. "She didn't tell me that was her real name; she goes by Sammie."

"In her position I think I should do the same. Anyway she doesn't get on well with her aunt and I'm quite sure she's not involved but, all the same, I'd prefer it if you didn't tell her either because the less people who know what I'm after the better. You and I are professionals; she's not." That was a nice touch; after the implied threat comes the open compliment. I nodded assent.

"You met Harry Kerridge last night?" she asked. I nodded again. "Where had he been?"

"Antwerp," I said. "You're testing me. You know that already."

The detective sergeant's face gave nothing away. "He didn't talk about going anywhere else?" she asked.

"Mr Kerridge was careful with his language; he didn't let much slip. He's one of those perfect hosts who talks about his guests all the time and not about himself. Unless that is you are interested in the fact that he's an authority on Grinling Gibbons."

Since DS Silver didn't seem any more likely than Orson to volunteer information, I asked her what this was about.

She still seemed inclined to play her cards close to her very attractive chest. "Speculate," she said.

I thought that this sort of fencing could probably go on all day and pleasant though her company might be, I was supposed to be elsewhere.

"Rumour hath it that Mr Kerridge is an art dealer who shuns close acquaintance with Her Majesty's Customs and Excise; I have absolutely no evidence of this and no real interest unless someone is paying me."

"My informants fund is piffling and you wouldn't accept it anyway;" she smiled. "But there might be an insurance reward if we're successful, assuming the insurance company doesn't go bust in the interim; it operates in some rather dodgy markets." That seemed an unexpectedly honest remark for one of Scotland Yard's finest. I thought I would try a little guesswork.

"Any chance of a connection with religious artefacts?"

"Go on," she said calmly.

"Of an Eastern European origin?"

"Go on," she repeated.

"Which end up in the United States?"

"What?" D.S. Silver registered surprise for the first time.

"The US bit could be my mistake," I conceded. "I was putting two and two together and maybe made six."

"Your arithmetic was flawless on the Silver scale until that point; care to explain?" She ordered two coffees and a plate of scones from the waitress who had just appeared.

I seemed to keep on encountering women with great figures who could eat like Billy Bunter; this one was far too attractive to be a policewoman. Her hair was almost black, parted in the middle and bound into a bun by an elasticised band of a golden colour which matched simple earrings; her face was oval, with almond eyes framed by a long lashes. A straight nose and a Mediterranean complexion suggested possible Jewish origins, which fitted her name.

I decided that you never knew when a few Brownie points with the Old Bill would come in handy; we all need favours every now and again. "I know that Orson ... sorry, Harry," I began, "knows a lot about religious art and architecture. I know that his sister-in-law Nadia, an art specialist, visits both Lithuania and Massachusetts on a regular basis. I know that Nadia and Mrs Kerridge have financial business together, though I have no idea whether it concerns Harry. Nadia didn't stay to meet Harry last night. That's about it; the rest you can put down to my nasty suspicious mind; that's what you get from being a private detective."

"If Harry and Nadia are in this together they might go to some lengths to avoid each other in public," D.S. Silver mused.

"What business exactly is that?" I asked.

"You seem to have figured out most of it; there is a smuggling ring. We know where the artefacts came from and the route they take to Britain via the Low Countries. What we don't know is where they hide them here and how they dispose of them. I'm very interested in the idea that they end up in the States. We've drawn a blank with every fence we know in the UK who would handle this kind of merchandise.

"I told you I was just guessing," I said.

"Would you like to guess some more?"

I shrugged. "Nadia has a cousin Valentina in Boston," I offered. "Surname unknown, I'm afraid. She visits her every summer."

"This man might have a promising career in the police force," said D.S. Silver.

She explained that these goods were moved very slowly; they sat for months in safe houses in various parts of Europe; it had taken a couple of years of effort to trace them this far. Harry Kerridge had arranged papers for the most recent shipment in Antwerp two days ago; several paintings by minor Dutch and German artists of the last century and a number of art deco bronzes.

"Not your Eastern European religious artefacts."

D.S. Silver shook her head patiently. "The crates don't contain what's declared. At the moment they're still in Antwerp; we need to know where they're being moved to over here in case we lose them en route." She took a large bite out of a scone and looked pointedly at me.

"I have no idea."

"But you could find out."

"How?" I demanded. "Walk up and ask him? Excuse me, Harry, but where are you proposing to stash the loot you're smuggling in from Belgium?"

"You seem to have discovered a lot already without being so crude," she smiled again. "You're on the inside, which means you have a lot of advantages over me."

"I've been a house guest for two nights. I'm not even sure I'm invited back. I don't think I rank very highly on Charlotte's list of favourite people." I did not explain why. "But if that were not enough," I pointed out, "Anthony will have reported our meeting."

"Anthony doesn't know me," said D.S. Silver. "I'm not local. I've never had any direct contact with the Kerridges or any of the family. You can say I'm your kissing cousin or an old flame, or whatever. I had intended it to be a slightly more ambiguous embrace than it turned out to be, but you only have yourself to blame." Her voice told me that she hadn't minded at all. "But I am still curious," she went on, "as to why Anthony's following you around. He's not known as a leg man for Harry Kerridge."

I pulled a face. "Well, I'm really guessing now," I said, "but I don't think his tailing me has anything to do with Harry Kerridge."

Her expression invited an explanation.

"Anthony has amateur written all over him; you spotted him easily; so did I. A professional like Harry wouldn't use someone who was so bad at the job and so obviously connectable to him. Anyway Anthony started following me yesterday morning before I had any idea about the smuggling business."

"So what's he after?" asked D.S. Silver.

"For what it's worth," I replied, "Michael Delabor and Charlotte Kerridge don't seem too thrilled with the idea of someone finding out the truth about the body in their garden. God knows why anyone should want to cover up about a two hundred year old murder, but it seems they do. I think Anthony is supposed to keep tabs on how close I'm getting."

I decided not to enlighten my policewoman friend about the possible reasoning behind this attempted cover up. I might have been able to persuade myself that witchcraft was alive and well and living in Lincoln, but I didn't fancy my chances of persuading a representative of the law, especially a female one, that I was not a candidate for a straitjacket.

"Did you clear your Lincoln operation with the local Chief Constable?" I asked.

"Gough?" she raised her eyebrows. "No, not yet. We'd only need his approval if we wanted to mount a major surveillance or a raid. We've not reached anything like that stage. Why do you ask?"

"He's on friendly terms with Michael Delabor and Michael wields a fair amount of political clout around Lincoln. If you go to Gough with anything less than a cast iron case for moving against Michael's family, you'll either get a flea in your ear or the whole operation might be blown."

"You don't have much confidence in our esteemed Chief Constable's ability to keep shtum?" D.S. Silver asked with a smile.

"In a word, no," I said.

"I'll bear it in mind." D.S. Silver gave me an appraising look. "Now," she continued, "can you get yourself invited back to the Kerridges tonight?"

I could imagine the response from Sammie, but I didn't propose to explain that to D.S. Silver either. But even by my outlandish theory it didn't seem likely that Sammie would be in any immediate danger from her relatives. If she were an intended sacrificial victim in two weeks time; they should have a strong interest in keeping her fit, well and unsuspecting.

"You're a smooth talking sort of fellow," said D.S. Silver. "You'll talk Sammie round. Anything you can give me about Harry Kerridge's planned movements over the next few days will be a great help."

"He said he was planning to stay home until after the New Year," I reported. "The import-export business has closed down for the holidays."

"Don't you believe it," she replied. "That stuff's going to move soon. A holiday with skeleton staffing in the customs will suit Harry just fine."

"Okay, I'll try," I said. "No guarantees, mind. If I get something, you owe me a favour. You never know when you're going to need a policeman in my business."

"It may have escaped your notice, but I'm not exactly a policeman." Judith Silver had an attractive smile.

"How can I contact you?"

"At the Post House."

"I can't ask for Detective Sergeant Silver, can I?" I hinted.

"My name's Judith, but I'm Miss Silver there, not DS." she said.

"Right you are then," I replied. "Well then Judith, how do we conclude this little charade for Anthony's benefit?"

"The same way we started it of course," she smiled. The eyelashes definitely fluttered. "Now, let's get it clear, am I cousin or girlfriend? Cousin would be better if you're worried about Sammie."

Judith Silver washed down the last of her scone with the last of her coffee and slipped me a fiver to pay the bill. I am all for accepting the hospitality of someone else's expense account, even females; no false chivalry about Toby Le Tocq. We parted with another hug on the doorstep of the Witch's Cauldron and she set off in the direction of the Post House whilst I made my way back to the MG.

XV - 12.30 Saturday 18th December

"The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me,"

Anthony was again trying to be inconspicuous behind a newspaper outside a shop across the road. The Mercedes was nowhere near my car and I reckoned Anthony would have trouble picking me up if I left quickly. I probably did break the speed limit out of Lincoln on the Borminster road, but I was unprepared for the police car that flagged me down before I was a mile out of town.

We drew into a lay-by formed by an old bend of the road which had been straightened out and was now almost cut off from the new course of the road like an ox-bow lake separated from a river. A stand of trees screened the lay-by from the road. Both the driver and his passenger got out and came towards me, which in my experience is not normal procedure. I took a quick look at the registration number of the patrol car. One of the policemen asked me to get out of the MG.

"Are you aware, sir, that you were doing forty five in a thirty mile an hour zone?" He spoke with an accent that was not local. He came from further north; Yorkshire I thought.

"I'm sorry, officer, I was trying to lose a nuisance who's been following me around," I replied. The traffic policeman seemed unimpressed.

"May I see your driving licence, sir?"

I took the licence from my wallet and showed him. He nodded with satisfaction. "This is him, Bert."

The second policeman grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back just as I figured out that these two would be unable to comply with my second request of the hour for sight of a warrant card. A solid fist slammed into my stomach as I tried to roll away from the arm lock and the pain doubled me up on the ground in a convenient position to be stretched out flat by a heavy kick. I was too winded by the surprise assault to put up much of a defence and for ten seconds, which seemed at the time much longer, I was subjected to a fairly thorough working over.

The shorter of the two bent down to check that I was still conscious. "Now, Mr Le Tocq," he said, "we represent various in'erested parties 'oo find your presence in this part of the country a little ... shall we say annoying? These in'erested parties suggest that you might like to take the rest of your holiday elsewhere. Just a word to the wise, Mr Le Tocq. Be gone by tomorrow evening or we might 'ave to come and speak to you again. Next time we might 'ave to be a little less ..." a last boot thumped into my ribs, "...gentle." They both went back to their car and drove off, leaving me lying shaken and dazed in the dirt at the side of the lay by.

When I managed to collect my wits I picked myself up and felt gingerly for broken bones. It seemed there was no serious damage; professionals don't usually break bones on a first warning. I slumped into the driver's seat of the MG and, taking out my diary, wrote down the registration number of the police car whilst I could still remember it. I coughed and spat into my handkerchief; there was no blood in my saliva.

After a couple of minutes I felt sound enough to continue along the road in the direction of Borminster. In the middle of the village I stopped at a telephone kiosk and rang the Post House Hotel. Fortunately Judith Silver had returned to her room and had not yet gone out again. She was surprised to hear from me so soon.

"I just had a brief discussion," I wheezed, "with two policemen in a patrol car. They recommended that I leave town. They offered me a free sample of what would happen if I didn't, with the result that I am no longer quite as suave and debonair as I was a few minutes ago when I left you."

"Two policemen did this?" she sounded incredulous.

"They had realistic uniforms and a realistic patrol car," I assured her. "Somebody went to an awful lot of trouble if the only purpose of this little exercise was to attract my attention." I gave her the number of the car and the best description I could manage of the fake policemen. She sounded as if she was noting it all down dutifully.

"Why don't you go to the local police and report this?" she asked.

"For the same reason I suggested that you shouldn't," I replied.

"If you want to pull out of our deal I'll understand. I'm sorry; I wasn't expecting strong arm tactics at this stage."

"Actually I tend to become rather irritated when people try to push me around," I said. "I'm staying; I'm on my way to Borminster Hall right now."

"Isn’t that straight into the lion's den?" Her voice sounded genuinely concerned.

"I’m expected. Besides my new chums gave me until tomorrow to pack my bags, so I should be safe enough for now."

"Don’t go back to the Kerridge’s overnight, in any case," she instructed. "Talk to Harry if you can but don’t put yourself in line for a disappearance." She paused. "Not that I’m concerned for your welfare of course but disappearing informants don’t look good on my C.V."

"I think I have a protective talisman," I said and put the phone down.

The Mercedes was two hundred yards away, parked on the main street. As I emerged from the kiosk I toyed with the idea of going over and offering Anthony a return of some of the favours I had received; he had probably watched the whole affair, even if he had not set it up. On reflection though there seemed nothing to be gained and a fair amount to be lost by such a course of action. So far as Anthony was concerned I didn't know I was being followed and I didn't know that my attackers were connected with him. It was probably best to leave things lie. In any case I was still on the fragile side of being able to go ten rounds with Naseem Hamed.

I could see John Peabody was out in his garden again; I wondered if he found time for parish work; on a Saturday you might have thought that he would be busy working on Sunday's sermon. When he saw me he waved vigorously and beckoned me over. I crossed the street, moving stiffly. His face was animated.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr Le Tocq. There's been another message." His eyes took in my dishevelled appearance. "But what happened to you? Are you all right?"

"A slight misunderstanding with another motorist," I said. "It's nothing. But two messages in twenty four hours? That's surely unusual?"

"In the beginning they were weeks apart," he nodded, "now Edith feels this terrible sense of urgency almost all the time."

Given that I was already so late, I declined his offer to come in for a coffee. He walked quickly to the door and went inside, reappearing just moments later with a piece of paper in his hand. I took the paper and read it carefully.

> *"Tell Monsieur Le Tocq he is in danger. There are great witches here. The red witch hides herself from me. Tell him to seek Victoria across the sea."*

"When exactly did the message arrive?" I pressed him.

The vicar furrowed his brow. "It would have been between eleven and midnight," he said. "I saw a light in the church yard and I went out to see what it was. That was about eleven; I had been reading and I just glanced out at the church before I went to bed. Edith wrote the message whilst I was away."

I considered the implications. Both Sammie and Charlotte had been otherwise occupied until beyond midnight. They could not be responsible for this. The likelihood that the messages were genuine had just increased substantially.

It did seem likely though that the colour red, associated with a woman, was referring to Charlotte's red hair. If the message was genuine then Charlotte was evidently able to hide her activities from the spirit world. This sounded like the sort of thing a self-respecting witch ought to be able to do, but the fact that she should feel the need to do it was strange. Was Charlotte aware of Lady Caroline's ghost? Was Edith Peabody, who seemed the only person through whom the ghost could communicate, in any danger as a result?

"Did you find anything in the churchyard?" I asked the vicar. It seemed unlikely that the coven would have been active there so close to the Millennium, but I was in a mood to peer under every stone now.

"Two graves had been robbed. I must have disturbed whoever it was. Such an age we live in. Even the dead are not safe."

"Rigg family graves?" I asked, suddenly suspicious.

"No, nowhere near the vault," he replied, "just ordinary local people who died some years ago. I reported the incident this morning. The police told me to expect a visit.

I wrote down for him the number of the fake police car. "If two policemen arrive in this car," I said, "I suggest you don't let them in and ring the real police double quick." Reverend Peabody looked mystified.

"They were the motorists with whom I had the disagreement," I explained.

He did not look reassured. "Good luck, Mr Le Tocq," he said as I departed.

I climbed into the MG and looked again at the message. It referred to me as "Monsieur". Nadia knew my nationality, though she had been inclined to treat Jersey as part of France. But why should she, or any local witch want me to go abroad? Surely, anywhere other than Borminster would do?

And if they did want me abroad, why would they give no more clues than "across the sea"? Why not, say, Sri Lanka or Tahiti or somewhere else that would take a long time to return from? On the other hand if the letter was authentic then the uncertainty about Victoria's location made more sense.

I set off for Borminster Hall with Anthony and his Mercedes dutifully tagging along a couple of hundred yards astern. As I drove up to the imposing frontage, I spotted the floral Mini sitting outside on the gravel and Sammie emerging from the door beneath the front steps. She hurried over as I got out of the car.

"Where on earth have you been?" she exclaimed. "We expected you hours ago." Then, with concerned eyes taking in my begrimed and bruised condition, she gasped, "Good grief what's happened? You look as if you got the worst of an argument with an all-in wrestler!"

"Close," I said. "Make that two all-in wrestlers, dressed as policemen."

"Policemen!" she seemed uncomprehending. "Are you all right? Did they hurt you? Have you reported it?"

"Yes, yes and no," I replied, taking her questions in order, in the hope that a little humour might lessen her concern. "These 'policemen' were probably working for Michael and Charlotte. Since those two are on such close terms with Gough, I don't see much point in trying to get the real police to protect me. I'll have to rely on myself ... and your defensive magic of course."

Sammie smiled, still running her hands over me as if to check how badly damaged her newly acquired goods were. "What did they want, these policemen?" she asked.

"To see the back of me," I replied. "However they didn't ask me nicely, so I don't propose to take any notice."

"Well talk about that later. But you're right about Gough; he's one of them," she added.

It figured. It was reasonable that the coven would want one of their own in a position where he could keep the police from investigating them. However this person would have to be loyal and unquestioning; an ambitious man in charge of the police could wield an inordinate amount of power in any secret society. In any case it spoke volumes for the political clout of the witches that they could get someone into such a position, unless of course they had used magic to recruit Gough after he was appointed to his post. Raphael had evidently been right in suggesting that Michael was not the only one of them who was a big wheel in local politics.

Sammie expressed far more concern over my bruises than she had seemed to feel over a possible threat to her own life. "It doesn't make sense that your policemen should have been working for Charlotte," she said doubtfully. "Serious witches don't need to use that kind of physical violence. Charlotte would find it demeaning. Orson may be your culprit; he's the sort who might have thugs on tap. Or perhaps Gough did it himself, trying to curry favour with the coven leaders. He is, after all, in a better position than anyone else to borrow a police car." Her eyes returned anxiously to my battered appearance. "Are you sure you don't need any treatment?" she asked solicitously.

"That depends," I said, "upon what you have in mind. Medical treatment, no; there may be other things you could do if you go easy on my bruises."

"Ahem," she smiled. "There's a time and place for everything and I doubt if quite such a public place at getting on lunch time is exactly suitable, tempted though I might be. Come up and see what we've discovered so far." She seemed genuinely pleased with their progress.

"I thought this sort of research normally took days," I said. "Are you telling me you've cracked it in a morning's work?"

"It more or less fell into our laps, so to speak," she replied. "It turns out that Victoria Delabor was the plaintiff in a celebrated breach of promise case in the late eighteen nineties. There was all sorts of material about it; legal documents, press cuttings, letters; lots of the stuff."

We climbed up to an attic room, high within the false roof of the house. There amidst the predicted cobwebs we found Professor Loder, spectacles perched on the end of his nose, happily riffling through documents. He was surrounded by paper, boxes and untied ribbons; piles more material was stacked all around the room; dust hung visibly in the air, its particles catching the sun's rays that filtered through two large but grimy skylights. Sammie spared me the trouble of going through my story about the fake policemen for the fourth time.

"Here's Toby at last," she began. "He's had a bit of an accident, but he's still in one piece, thank goodness. Can you show him what we've found?" The professor looked at me over his spectacles and evidently decided that he'd seen worse.

"Young fellows with sports cars, I don't know," he said. "You need your head for better things than banging into windscreens, Toby. However, you'll be glad to hear that this is one of the easier cases I've come across; somebody filed this material quite meticulously at one time."

Victoria Delabor had been betrothed early in 1899 to the Duke of Porton's eldest son. It was a very suitable match; the Delabors were gentry but wealthy; the Portons were aristocracy but poor. Everything seemed to have gone well at first; there was a copy of a contract setting out details of dowry and so on. Then after a couple of months the boy backed out suddenly, giving no satisfactory explanation. The Delabors felt insulted enough to endure the publicity that a breach of promise suit would bring. In court the boy had given few details beyond saying that the young lady's circumstances were not as he had been led to believe; this clearly wasn't anything to do with money, because she was certainly an heiress. However the case had been halted and counsel announced that the parties had agreed an out of court settlement.

The professor pushed his spectacles back up his nose as he completed his tale.

"That would make her position even worse, surely?" I responded.

"Indeed it seems to have done so," he replied. "She seems to have felt the disgrace so severely that she left home; a most unusual thing for a young lady of quality of her age to have done at the time."

That was important information; we had already surmised that a foreign travel story might have camouflaged the earlier murder; Victoria had allegedly left home in 1899, close to the next crucial date. It seemed there was documentary evidence that Victoria had gone to stay with an aunt in Dorset; she had stayed there three months. There had been just one letter from that destination to her parents; it indicated that she was leaving for Jersey to join a religious community.

"Jersey!" I exclaimed. The coincidence that this was my birthplace was the first thing that struck me; the second was that Lady Caroline's message had told me to seek Victoria across the sea.

"Yes indeed, your home is it not?" Professor Loder continued. "Do you know the convent perhaps? It's called La Hougue Sainte."

Not only did I know of the place but I had occasionally been there. It was isolated, in so far as it is possible to be very isolated on an island barely nine miles long, up in the north west beyond Ville la Bas, not far from Le Col de la Rocque where the long Atlantic rollers drive in uninterrupted from America. No doubt contemplation of the sea induces a suitable feeling of humility, though why someone who has been publicly humiliated should require further lessons in being humble I could not imagine. I thought I might know why young Porton might have withdrawn hurriedly from the engagement, though I didn't want to speak of it in front of the professor; yet it was interesting, assuming that Victoria, like the rest of her family, had the power that she should have ended up in a Christian community.

"I know where it is," I said. "It’s not an ancient community; the convent was only founded in the middle of the nineteenth century. It still exists; in fact from time to time our shop used to supply them with gardening tools and so on; an old nun used to come into town; a couple of times I had to take stuff up there in the van."

"What a small world it is," said the professor and launched into a reminiscence of a recent visit to Africa, at which who should sit next to him at dinner but an old school friend of his that he hadn't seen for thirty years. "We had been talking to each other for ten minutes before we realised; wasn't that astonishing?"

We agreed that it was truly amazing. In point of fact, given that Victoria had gone to Jersey, I was hardly surprised that I knew the place. An island like Jersey is very much like a village where everyone knows everyone else. I was constantly encountering other Jerseymen in a number of unlikely locations; that is, the locations would, I suppose, have been unlikely if I hadn't happened to be there myself.

"She must have gone to La Hougue Sainte in late October 1899, assuming that she left Dorset not long after writing the letter," said the professor.

"So her family knew where to find her at the end of the year," Sammie whispered, "assuming she was admitted to the convent and didn't move on elsewhere; unless, of course, it's a horrible place and she decided not to stay."

"I would say it's pleasant enough if you're that way inclined," I said. "I never had much notion for the enclosed life myself; I find whole islands rather claustrophobic, let alone isolated religious houses."

"Could we contact the convent and enquire about Victoria?" Sammie asked. "Are they on the phone?"

"As I recall, the only way to contact the convent is to write them a letter or knock on the front door. When I lived in St Helier the nuns had no phone and I'll be surprised if things have changed all that much in the last few years."

"Then let's go and visit them" Sammie laughed. "You can take me on a nice cruise and oblige your rough friends at the same time by leaving town,"

This was something else that I didn't want to discuss in front of Professor Loder. "Yes, well .... maybe Tuesday," I hesitated.

Sammie gave me the sort of look that suggested I had a fair bit of explaining to do.

XVI - 13:45 Saturday 18th December

"I am my beloved's and his desire is towards me."

"What do you mean; you want to stay another couple of nights?" Sammie asked accusingly. We had just finished eating, having treated Professor Loder to a late lunch in the George as thanks for his efforts in the good cause. Sammie took advantage of the professor's temporary absence (the men's toilet turned out to be in the back yard,) to utter the protest which I had known was coming.

"I don't like caving in to threats," I replied.

"You can spare me the Wild West style machismo, Toby. I'm a very practical girl. When the black hats have more manpower than you, that's a good time to skedaddle!"

"Look, Sammie, we have to get the skull back into the coffin before Tuesday; we still haven't discovered the identity of the body from which it came; we haven't even proved that the victim was murdered in 1799. Without that link in the chain, the search for an 1899 murder, Victoria or anyone else, is no better than speculative. We have to know who this body is and why she was murdered whereas the previous two in the sequence were judicial executions."

Sammie tried to reason with me. "I'll get the computer image of the victim within the next day or so; any on line machine will do, in Cambridge or Jersey or wherever. The guide book has photographs of the paintings so we don't need to see the originals again. And to get the skull, I have to go to Cambridge. You should go with me to Cambridge and then I can make a quick solo return trip on Monday to return the skull. I can't see anything to be gained by staying in Borminster. You could get hurt by the thugs you met this morning. Or we both could get hurt if we give Charlotte time to produce some serious witchcraft!" Placing both her hands on my face, she looked me straight in the eyes and said, "For goodness sake Toby, I don't require any demonstrations of how brave you are. I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"Do you suppose this is the first time I've ever been warned off?" I asked in my best reassuring voice. The modern P.I. business sometimes needs a little athleticism of the body as well as of the grey cells. In Poirot’s day the bad guys were usually gentlemen and though they might go in for murder they would seldom stoop to fisticuffs; unfortunately the world has moved on. Nevertheless, the hired muscle had surprised me that morning; they wouldn't catch me unawares again. As for Charlotte's witchcraft, as far as I could see it hadn't represented much of a threat so far and Sammie herself had survived years of it when she lived with her aunt; how much harm could another night or two possibly do?

"Toby, you don't understand," she sighed in exasperation. Since I was so dense she did her best to explain. "I used to be able to cope with Charlotte when she saw me just as a nuisance. Now she's angry with me because she’d wanted you for herself; she probably thinks that I had something to do with bringing Orson home early too."

"And did you?" I asked.

"I told you," Sammie replied, "I'm a big girl now. I can look after myself. But it was a lot harder than I expected to concentrate on defensive spells last night." She smiled in spite of her efforts to look stern. "In fact as I recall I may have quite lost my self control."

"Never noticed," I declared. "I must have been distracted." Sammie grinned. "But as for Charlotte being angry, in my line of business when your opponent is angry, that's when he starts to make mistakes."

Sammie shook her head. "Not this lady," she said firmly. "Look, aggressive witchcraft requires time for thought and preparation; she didn’t have long enough last night. We can't rely on Orson to exercise his conjugal rights every night."

"Maybe Fisto will still be unwell?" I suggested.

"Charlotte needs time more than she needs the cat," she implored me. "Toby, the least she will do is to try and split us up; she can do that much more easily at close range. Her worst might involve your injury or disappearance; she would do it in a much more subtle way than Orson or Gough would arrange, but you could end up just as dead." Her face was a mask of concern.

"Isn't that a bit extreme?" I asked. "What motive could she have for something like that?"

"You said yourself that Charlotte and Michael want to cover up the identity of the body in the garden," Sammie replied urgently. "They aren't doing that for fun, are they? They know who it is and why she was killed. Obviously they can't afford snoopers. Don't you realise to what lengths they can go if they're really determined to prevent exposure?"

"I don't see what's really changed since yesterday, Sammie."

"Oh you don't? Well thanks a bunch! You really were distracted last night."

"You know I didn't mean that. I meant you were calm in the face of the same threats yesterday," I assured her.

"I used to think I had nothing much to lose," she shook her head. "That changed last night." She took hold of my hand and looked earnestly into my eyes once again; the image of those eyes closing in ecstasy the previous night flashed upon my brain. I knew that I must do everything in my power to protect her, even if it should cost me my own life.

"But also," she explained, "it was true that I used not to believe in the curse. I convinced myself it was just a local superstition that someone long ago got up to explain how the Rigg family managed to remain rich and influential. It's starting to look like more than that now. I don't know why, but if we're to believe the alleged Lady Caroline's ghost, then your personal safety could be the key to the whole mystery." She squeezed my hand more tightly. "You've no right to put yourself at risk."

It was typical that she saw the danger to me more clearly than the danger to herself. I had still not told her about the latest piece of automatic writing telling me to look for Victoria across the sea. Now that we knew she had left for Jersey in 1899 it seemed confirmation of her fate. "It looks more and more likely that Victoria came to a sticky end on Jersey and that the late Lady Caroline is somehow aware of it," I said.

"Possibly four deaths in a row on the centennial eve," Sammie mused.

"Then you are worried?" I asked gently.

"Well in a fortnight's time, if we've identified the body and traced Victoria, maybe I'll admit to being seriously frightened," she replied. "Right now I don't know enough to understand how the curse works."

"Then how about this?" I said. "Mary Bullivant didn't make the Riggs witches. You told me yourself the power is inherited; that means they already had it in their blood. Are we supposed to believe that Sir Giles Rigg arriving in Borminster from London and finding Mary Bullivant already there was just a coincidence? He may well have come looking for her. Whether he did or not, there was already something between them before her execution. Two witch families in the same area would at least know about each other, wouldn't they? Possibly they were even in the same coven. Maybe he threw her to the witchfinders to distract attention from himself. Anyway, whatever she said to him as she died wasn't some powerful magic, though the crowd thought it was. You told me that even powerful witches need time to prepare major spells. Mary was arrested, tortured and executed in the space of a few days. When did she have the time?"

Sammie's voice dropped to a whisper to avoid being overheard by the other diners. "You really are a detective, aren't you?" she said. "How long have you been investigating this, three days?" She sighed and shook her head, so that the blonde hair fell across in front of her face.

"So Mary Bullivant told Sir Giles something," I suggested. "She didn't expect to be spared, so what she told him was a sort of revenge. She gave him knowledge that would hurt him. It appears to have involved the death of a female member of his family and it involved payment as well as death, just as her own execution did." I paused and took a deep breath. "Perhaps she was using a sort of voluntary human sacrifice. Do witches go in for that sort of thing?"

"Not that I'm aware," said Sammie looking unhappy at my questioning, "but I told you, I don't know much about the black arts."

It was as I suspected. If Sammie knew nothing of the sacrifice through Moloch that Mary Bullivant might have intended her burning to be, there was nothing to be gained by alarming her at this stage. Perhaps the Rigg family in 1799 believed that the centennial sacrifice was the source of their power, perhaps not; they might still have murdered an expendable female relative to be on the safe side. Alternatively maybe they were making a deliberate sacrifice to Baal but ignorant of the fact that they should be burning the victim, not shooting her.

The same dichotomy would have applied to the Delabors in 1899; they certainly had a female relative who had contrived to become very expendable, as well as out of public view.

Was it conceivable that in 1999 Michael and Charlotte should believe anything of that sort? I wasn’t sure whether it was more incongruous that the chairman of the police committee should be a Baal worshipper than that he should be a warlock, but as far as Sammie was concerned it probably made little difference; she was in danger either way.

"Did you really figure all this out for yourself?" said Sammie. "Are you sure you're a detective and not really a warlock?"

"If I am, my power doesn't extend to fixing car heaters or erecting force-fields against fake policemen," I replied and any further exchanges on these matters were cut short by Professor Loder's return to the table.

"As I was saying, Toby," he said, "none of the papers we were inspecting this morning were as old as 1799. So far we've found nothing relating to the Riggs or even to the Delabors themselves before they inherited the estate in the 1850's."

So these papers could not help us with the identification of the body in the walled garden. However there were more still to be checked.

"The Delabor inheritors of the estate would have needed title deeds, tenancy agreements with the farmers, employment records of any servants they kept on; all sorts of administrative papers, even if they had preserved no personal documents," the professor added.

"Are the business papers in the same place?" I asked.

"Unlikely," he said. "Estate records were often bound volumes. Old ones might be in bookshelves. The in-use volume where monthly rent payments and other accounts were recorded would usually be kept in a locked desk drawer in whatever room the landlord or his estate manager used as an office-cum-interview-with-the-peasants room." Loder chuckled at the thought. "My own employers' theories of man management have advanced remarkably little since those days actually."

"That was the era of secret compartments in furniture and secret panels in fireplaces and that sort of thing," Sammie chipped in. "Borminster Hall is riddled with hidey-holes; I used to show some of them to the tourists."

"Presumably none of the hidey-holes that you know about contain any documents," I said, "and if we don't know about others we aren't likely to find them."

"Most such things are discovered by accident, I fear," the professor agreed.

Then all of a sudden I had an idea. "Wait a minute! The letter from Lady Caroline Rigg! What set of papers did that come from?" I marvelled at my own obtuseness in not thinking of it before.

"The National Trust set up the exhibition," Sammie said, "I met the girl who did it last summer. She didn't have a lot of papers. I think she just asked Michael what he had from 1799 and he gave her that one."

"So Michael has other papers!" I grinned. I knew what I really wanted to find; ever since Raphael had revealed to me that it was normal for witches to keep a diary of spells, I knew I needed to get hold of George Kesford's own. If such a book existed it would be an obvious candidate for concealment in a hidden compartment, with the location probably known only to George himself. If he had become unbalanced before his death, would he have had the presence of mind to destroy it? There must be a reasonable chance that, if such a book had existed, it had survived. Perhaps even Michael would not know where it was, since the last Rigg, who died in the Crimea, would not have been able to hand over documentation to the Delabors even had he wanted to.

The early nineteenth century witch's diary that had been in Thurles' possession had previously been in the ownership of

Frances Chalmers, née Rigg, Sammie's mother. According to Sammie her mother had practised only defensive witchcraft; but, according to Charlotte, Frances had been "the scholar". Since Frances' daughter was academic, the word 'scholar' might have meant nothing more than that Frances was good at school; however it might have meant that Frances was a good student of the occult. It was possible to inherit a library from one's father and never read the books, just as Charlotte claimed, but it was plausible that the diary had been bequeathed by Sir Robert Delabor to the child that he felt best equipped to make use of it. I began to suspect that Frances had been more of a witch than Sammie believed.

Sammie herself had been only eleven at the time the diary had changed hands; there was no reason to suppose that she knew of any more advanced occult activities of her mother's. However the evidence seemed to suggest that Charlotte had not known of the diary either; a powerful witch would not otherwise have allowed it to fall into the hands of an antiquarian bookseller. It therefore seemed likely that both Frances and her late father had concealed knowledge of the diary from Charlotte and Michael. In that case, who else could have known of its existence and forced Thurles to part with it?

The task of locating that diary was beyond me; the task of finding any occult records held by Sir Michael, however, was something for which I felt quite well prepared. I needed a certain amount of equipment that I had not brought with me on holiday; it was not supposed to have been that sort of investigation.

Sammie and the professor were ready to resume their sorting of the papers in the attic. I excused myself, on the grounds that the two of them had already shown that they could manage without me and arranged to meet both of them again at The George for dinner.

"And what are you going to be doing?" Sammie demanded. "Looking for more accidents? You should stay with us where I can keep an eye on you!"

"I need to contact Doreen and see if she's made progress," I replied truthfully. "And after that I need to check whether La Hougue Sainte is still in business and still without a telephone." To Sammie's obvious pleasure, I added, "And you're right. We shouldn't impose on your aunt's hospitality for another night; we should see if we can book a room in the hotel and leave tomorrow."

This concession proved enough to persuade her that I should be left to my own devices for a few hours, provided that I promised to keep a careful lookout. When the two of them returned to Borminster Hall, I went to the phone and called Doreen at home. She was, I am sorry to say, used to being imposed upon in her spare time.

"Now why was I expecting your call, Toby?" she asked. "Explain to me why it is so urgent to know that an East Indiaman went down on the forty-sixth parallel, about one hundred leagues due west of La Rochelle on April twenty-second in the year of our Lord 1800."

"You've traced the Golden Venture already?" I enthused, "Doreen you're a marvel."

"Of course I am;" she replied prosaically, "nothing but a marvel could hold down a job with Blomberg and Le Tocq. As it happens, the Golden Venture was sailing within sight of another Company ship, but because of the weather conditions this companion vessel wasn't able to close with her in time to save any survivors. She seems to have sunk like a stone with all hands. Very sad, of course, but too late for tears, I think. Now would you mind telling me what it's all about?"

"Believe it or not," I said, "I appear to be receiving regular letters from a woman who claims to have been on that ship when it went down."

"Toby, the air so far north must be very thin. It has evidently addled your brain!"

"No, I'm serious Doreen," I explained. "There's a medium in Borminster who appears to have the gift of automatic writing."

"Any flying pigs?" replied Doreen calmly. "Trust you to find a witness, even if the crime you're investigating is two hundred years old. Sounds fascinating; tell me more. What does she say, this shipwrecked lady?"

"She's not actually the reason for my call," I parried, "I need my black bag; can you put it on a train to Lincoln for me?"

"What on earth are you doing?" Doreen exclaimed. "This is supposed to be a quiet holiday enquiry! First you're in touch with the spirit world and now you want the black bag? Hang on a minute, let me check the timetable." There was a brief delay and then Doreen came back on the line with, "There's a train gets in at nine; I'll be on it."

"Doreen there's no need for you to come," I protested, "Just put the bag on the train to be collected."

"Do you want it to arrive safely or not?" she replied. "I wouldn't like you to have to explain the contents to a lost property clerk. I'll see you at nine, Toby."

There was no arguing with her and in any case she was a veteran collaborator of mine in this sort of activity. I agreed to meet her off the train. Then I drove the MG to the Kerridges' house on the outskirts of Lincoln.

XVII - 14:45 Saturday 18th December

"I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure ..."

As I had expected, the Range Rover was alone in the drive. Harry Kerridge's car had been around the back of Borminster Hall when I had looked out to check that Anthony's Mercedes had duly followed me there after this morning's fracas. Unless I had missed its passage during my brief telephone call, no silver grey Jaguar had passed the George on its way back to Lincoln since Sammie, the professor and I had installed ourselves in a convenient window seat in the dining room overlooking the main road. Mrs Kerridge answered the door herself. Maybe the servants had the afternoon off.

"Why, Toby! How nice to see you back," she smiled.

There was no Sammie and no Orson around, so we were back on first name terms; that was good news. I came straight out with the ostensible reason for my visit.

"I wanted to apologise for last night," I began, without preamble. "Sammie took me as much by surprise as she did you; I thought that I'd better humour her rather than embarrass everyone in public."

Mrs Kerridge appeared somewhat put out. "You don't think it was humouring Sammie a bit far to spend the night in her bedroom?"

"Look, we're not lovers!" I lied. "I'd just heard that your husband was on his way home, so it was obvious that our date was off; I had no alternative accommodation and I had no particular reason to want a fight with Sammie. As a matter of fact, I spent a particularly uncomfortable night sleeping on the floor; after that odd business with the napkin rings, she seemed completely exhausted."

If Charlotte were capable of disembodied movement, I was gambling that Orson had indeed kept her occupied and therefore she had not seen Sammie and me in bed together, nor heard our noise in the process of making some of her own. In the event that she already knew from Anthony of my morning's activities then she knew that I had not spent long with Sammie today. As for Sammie's exhaustion, that had had nothing to do with napkin rings, but it never hurts to leave your enemy feeling over-confident.

"I'm can't say that I'm unhappy to hear that!" Charlotte said. "Sammie is a very strange girl, as I told you before. She has weird ideas. I'm afraid she never really got over the shock of losing both her parents at such an early age. Would you like to come in and have a cup of tea, Toby?"

I accepted the invitation. Charlotte conducted me through into an attractive modern kitchen. There was no sign of servants, but Fisto the cat was curled up in a basket beside the central heating boiler. I unsubtly enquired whether he had been unwell the previous night. If Charlotte was put out by the question she covered it very well.

"He was out on the tiles most of the night; I'm surprised you didn't hear him. What a noise that cat can make!" Ah! So she believed that it had been the cat making the noise. Was she serious?

"I thought he went everywhere with you," I said.

"Not quite everywhere," Charlotte smiled, "He is a tom cat you know; he occasionally has other business to occupy him." She looked at me from under her chestnut lashes. "And so of course do I!"

The thought crept unbidden into my mind that the business of a tom cat and of a lady who was capable of turning herself into a tabby might not necessarily involve going their separate ways. I choked and turned it into a cough. I sat down on a solid pine chair at the kitchen table.

"Is Harry off on business again already?" I asked. "In his place I think I would have had my feet up in front of the TV for an afternoon's rest."

"Harry is rather neglectful," she pouted. "You heard me ask him last night if he was back for Christmas? Didn't he say he was staying for two or three weeks? Now the dreadful man has to go calling at Borminster and then he's off to Harwich, for goodness sake; hardly even home before he's off again until Monday."

I had observed before that Charlotte was not inhibited. It appeared that not only had my explanation about Sammie been accepted, but that the invitation made to me earlier was being extended again. In retrospect I had to agree with Sammie that the incident of the fake policemen was hardly Charlotte's style. I reminded myself that I was well on the way to falling in love with Sammie. Somehow in Charlotte's presence, hypnotic even in the early afternoon, that fact was hard to remember.

She was wearing an ankle length grey silk housecoat; sheer, not quilted. The waist was narrow and fitted and several pleats allowed the lower part more fullness, so that she seemed to glide rather than walk. It could have buttoned all the way from its lapel-style neckline to the knee, but Charlotte had left the bottom four buttons undone; that would only have preserved her modesty if she had refrained from moving.

She lifted the kettle. "Would you perhaps care for something stronger?"

"It's a little early in the day for me."

"You're not a slave to convention surely?" she smiled. "The sun is well over the yardarm, as I believe they used to say in the navy. In so far, that is, as there is any sun and in so far as we still have a navy."

"I was thinking rather, that I'm driving and I could do without any more trouble from the police; they've pulled me over once already today."

"The police?" Charlotte looked at me quizzically. "Now isn't that just typical? Never around when you need them and always turning up when you don't. What did you do to annoy them?"

I have to say that, if you or your friends have just organised a beating of your interlocutor by fake policemen, it takes a lot of nerve to deliver a line like that. Charlotte's voice not only asked the question as though she meant it, but her face held an inquiring look too. If she was guilty she deserved a best actress award.

"My existence annoys the police," I replied, with an attempt to sound irritated. "Private detectives would be almost redundant if our redoubtable guardians of the law were remotely competent. The London cops usually enjoy harassing us and it seems the Lincolnshire Constabulary is cut from the same cloth. It hasn't taken them long to find me. I dare say my local nick tipped them the wink; they're still trying to get back at me after I made them look rather silly last summer." I was scattering a little ground bait and I got the impression that Charlotte was quite likely to bite.

"What did you do to them last summer?" she enquired as she set the kettle on the hob.

"They have this strange notion that I'm a smuggler," I said. "I make regular trips to Jersey to see my family; I have my own boat at Poole."

"Being a private eye must pay very well," Charlotte observed.

"There are profitable opportunities," I smiled, tapping the side of my nose in the manner of one delivering a word to the wise, "if you know where to look for them. Anyhow my local cops had tipped off the Customs to raid the boat when I got back from St Helier last June."

"They found nothing of course?" Charlotte said.

"As you say," I nodded. "As it happens, a little bird warned me to expect a visit." I was warming to my tale now and the imaginary details flowed. "The cops got very excited when they found an oilskin pouch under the inspection hatch on the forecastle; quite a lot of gloating they did before they opened it. You know the way they do; ‘'Ello, 'ello, 'ello, what's all this then?’." (The last real police officer to approach me had used a rather different technique, but when spinning a yarn I find that the old ones are the best ones.)

"And what was in the pouch?" Charlotte asked, clearly intrigued.

"Silk stockings, French, very sheer," I grinned in reminiscence. "Not pantyhose; the real thing, along with some outrageously decadent suspender-belts. They'd had to be wrapped in oilskin because of the spray, you understand. In fact, do you know, I still have a couple of pairs; they would suit you. Would you like them? I could send them up to you."

Charlotte put her hand over her mouth. "Whatever would my husband say?" she chuckled. "More to the point, what did the police say?"

I put on my best Lionel Jeffries accent. "There will be another day Monsewer! Mark my words, there will be another day!"

Charlotte laughed openly. "And was there another day?"

"A couple of other days, actually, in July, but they seemed to give up after three strike outs."

"More little birds?" enquired Charlotte.

"A positive aviary," I smiled. "Cheep, cheep."

"Do you mean that they go cheep, or they come cheap?" she asked smartly.

I laughed with her, conspiratorially. "A bit of both really, but it all gets lost in the expense account."

I knew that it might seem odd that a suspected smuggler should boast about his achievements to a comparative stranger, but in my experience most people do not regard modest smuggling as a crime. In any case, whilst I might be a stranger, I was after all, only a comparative stranger; we had been to bed together, even if I could not recall what had taken place. I had not claimed to be smuggling narcotics or guns or anything seriously beyond the pale. More than likely Charlotte would simply assume that I was evading duty on booze or tobacco. I reckoned that excise duty evasion would be seen as a game by someone in her social position. However, if she was familiar with the true nature of Orson’s activities, then she would, with luck, perceive me as an amateur dabbling in the same pool.

She frowned with mock seriousness. "You are quite, quite dreadful!" she said. "I should report you here and now! However, there is an awful lot of tax on single malt whisky and Harry gets through crates of the stuff every year; if by any chance, you know … you happened to be aware of any that might have …fallen off the back of a boat, so to speak …?"

"Actually the forecastle is the front of a boat," I replied, "but I’ll be sure to make a note of it … if I ever should come across any whisky in such unfortunate circumstances, that is."

"It’s really just legitimate private enterprise," Charlotte said. "We all have to make a living, after all."

"Even the cops have to make a living," I agreed, "just so long as they don't make it at my expense." I paused for effect. "Well, not all of them anyway."

Charlotte laughed. She made the tea and set the pot, milk jug and two cups on the table. She seated herself at a chair pushed some way back from the edge of the table, smiled at me again and slowly crossed her legs; the unbuttoned silk fell away completely from her right thigh, but she appeared not to notice. If she wore anything beneath the housecoat it could only be the briefest of briefs. She slipped her heel out of her shoe and dangled the shoe from her toes reflectively.

"Do you know," she said, "I have never been to Jersey. I should like to go some day. Perhaps you could take me on your boat?"

"That would be a great pleasure, Charlotte, but unfortunately the boat has only the one cabin. As you so appositely remarked, whatever would your husband say?"

"Oh, Harry is very fond of exploring interesting sea routes," said Charlotte with an arch look, "but I don't know that he's ever been to Jersey either; we could call it research." I have heard it called many things, but never before had I heard it called research. "Harry is a very sensible man," Charlotte assured me, "and when he gets to know you better, he'll be very understanding, you'll see."

"If you say so," I agreed with an exaggerated wide-eyed look. "Sadly however, he may not get the chance; your friendly neighbourhood policemen were rather insistent that I should leave town. You might say they made a marked impression of their views upon me."

"I had rather wondered," said Mrs Kerridge, reaching out a hand gently to touch the graze on my forehead. "I didn't like to ask. The police did that to you? They must dislike you quite a lot."

"The feeling is entirely mutual," I said. "However, since I am not in Lincoln on business, I was not inclined to stand on my rights. If I was acting on behalf of a client, or I had some financial interest, I'd be happy enough to take a more robust line; but it doesn't pay to antagonise the Old Bill unnecessarily. I'm only messing around after all; just a sort of busman's holiday."

Charlotte seemed genuinely disappointed. She was maybe regretting that her more diverting method of distracting me from my interest in the Borminster body was not likely to be prolonged. "So you're leaving then?" she asked.

"First thing in the morning," I said. "I took a room at the George in Borminster, because I didn't want to disturb you by getting up at the crack of dawn on a Sunday morning; I really just came by to apologise, as I said."

"That was very considerate of you," Charlotte smiled. "But quite unnecessary. What about Sammie? I assume she's not coming back here on her own?"

"She's been at Borminster Hall all day, buried under a mound of documents with some dry old stick of a university professor. She's going back to Cambridge tomorrow, but she said she would stay at The George too; separate rooms this time of course."

Charlotte seemed to be pleased that she had been right all along. "So, I'm going to be all alone again, am I?" she purred. "Well that's a great shame. I thought that the night before last was going to be the start of a long and beautiful friendship."

"Of course we'll still be able to meet in London, or when you come to Jersey," I said.

"That's a consolation," said Charlotte. "And in the meantime, since you're giving up your little investigation, you won't be particularly busy this afternoon, will you?" She crossed her legs the other way and the housecoat fell away from the other thigh.

There are times when, in the interests of giving a convincing performance, the committed private investigator finds it necessary to stray from the straight and narrow. Sometimes he is required to be more than agreeable to a woman that he actively dislikes. Sometimes professionalism demands considerable personal sacrifices; you metaphorically grit your teeth, lie back and think of England.

This wasn't one of the times.

XVIII - 18:00 Saturday 18th December

"Thou has ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck,"

Looking back it is difficult to discern the moment when I realised that I was in love with Sammie. I'm not a believer in love at first sight, though it is undeniable that I was attracted to her from the moment that I met her in Borminster Hall. My feelings had not at that time coalesced into a conscious commitment to her as my only partner. I had known her less than three days. Yet whenever I was with her it was hard to restrain myself from putting my arm round her in a proprietorial and protective manner. Close physical contact with her seemed to satisfy a need in me of which I had previously been unaware.

And yet, when she was not with me, I was still susceptible to the attractions of a woman like Charlotte, who satisfied a need in me of which I had long been perfectly well aware. Charlotte enjoyed sex and she enjoyed creating enjoyment for her sexual partner. There was no suggestion on either part that our relationship went any deeper than physical gratification, but the lack of profound emotion somehow did not seem important when I was with her. Being on opposing teams does not necessarily imply that you must dislike each other. I knew that Charlotte's primary intention had been to lure me off the scent; now she liked her work. Leave aside any question of magic; I doubt many men could have resisted her and I had, at the time, no inclination to try.

If you're being charitable you may call it the naïveté of my relative youth at the time. No doubt you will say that an average reasonable man would have concentrated on doing one thing right and that by far the most important thing was Sammie's safety. But I was, in my own estimation, pretty experienced. It didn't occur to me that the standard of tests might be raised in one bound from primary school to degree level. I was Marlowe, wasn't I?

Up against me I had a director of a merchant bank, a chief constable, an extremely well off art dealer-cum-smuggler and assorted alleged witches of varying degrees of talent, at whose powers I could only guess. So, no serious competition there.

And on Marlowe's side, what? One junior witch of limited abilities but very pretty; D S Silver; a confused ghost and a weird bookseller. Well of course - the supremely talented detective invariably triumphs in all the stories.

Around six o'clock I called Judith Silver from a phone box in Lincoln and told her that Harry Kerridge had headed for Harwich via Borminster, whither, I was fairly sure, he had gone to confer with Nadia.

"Mrs Kerridge is persuaded that I've given up my investigation. She may also have formed the impression that I have a sideline in smuggling that might, some day, be useful. It's just possible that if she plants that idea in Harry's mind he might be tempted to cut me in."

"Why should he?" she asked, "when at the moment he's making all the profit himself?"

"A change of route would be a very attractive proposition to him if your people seem close to intercepting the shipment. How about some unusual police or customs activity at Harwich whilst he's there?"

"Are you kidding?" she laughed. "Over a holiday period? On whose budget?"

"You could make use of the fact that it's a holiday. Tell him low staffing means his stuff will have to sit in bond until it can be inspected in the New Year."

"I'll see what I can arrange," she said. "Customs owe me a favour. But I have to say, Toby, that gumshoes aren't usually this co-operative. What's in it for you?"

"Let's say that I'm keen to stay on good terms with his wife," I said, avoiding the issue. "Meanwhile, Harry might make enquiries about whether my boat has ever been raided by Customs. It might be embarrassing if he were to discover that they've never heard of me."

"I can see that," said Judith Silver. "So what's your boat's name?"

"I don't have a boat," I confessed. "Fred Blomberg, my partner, does, but I've crewed for him often enough. He won't be worried about the ownership being in my name for the purposes of this enquiry, or about me taking the boat to Jersey on my own. She's called Sea Witch; berthed at Poole." The name for once seemed apposite.

"You, my friend, are pushing your luck," she said. "I will do what I can. But I don't believe you don't have some angle here; just remember I'm the fuzz. A certain amount of private enterprise I can overlook, but you had better not be up to a whole lot of mischief, Toby."

"Scout's honour," I said.

"You were never a scout, Toby," she rejoined. "I had you checked out, remember. Now, about your two policemen from this morning …"

"I'd thought you'd never mention it." I smiled.

"The interesting thing is that it was a real police car," she continued. "It was booked in at the garage for servicing all day, but it was the last of three in a queue. It was never missed. When they got round to it, it was exactly where it had been left. They just got on and gave it a complete service and valet."

"Helpfully removing any forensic evidence," I completed.

"You're the only witness that it wasn't where the garage thought it was. No-one notes the registration of a police car. The driver had keys; no signs of tampering. I covered up my enquiry carefully, because whoever wants you out of the way is obviously well clued up on the movements of police vehicles."

"Either a bent copper or good friends with one," I said. "But it's so much unnecessary effort if all they wanted was to warn off little old me. I suspect they need access to police cars for some other job."

"Modesty ill becomes you, but you're probably right. And definitely not amateurs this time. Some bigger player than whoever set the tail on you?"

"I'll oblige them by going away for a day or two, but I hope to be more welcome in the Kerridge household when I get back."

"It's too dangerous for you to come back, Toby. Take Sammie and get lost well away from this mess."

"Let's just remember that I'm not an undercover policeman," I demurred. "I might very well have dropped my enquiries from lack of evidence if they hadn't tried quite so hard to make sure that I did. I have a very contrary nature; if it's worth someone taking the trouble to stop me, then it's worth me going to a bit of trouble to continue. There's a mystery about this body and I'm not far from getting to the bottom of it."

"I was wrong about you having a career in the police force," she said. "All right, don't tell me the truth. I'll just have to trust you not to drop me in it, Toby, though why I should I don't know."

"Hey," I said. "You came to me remember. Anyway I have an honest face."

"Look after yourself, Toby," she concluded. "I need a result here but you're getting in a lot deeper than I intended."

I put down the phone and drove to the George in Borminster in time to meet Sammie and the professor for dinner. The Mercedes, predictably and obviously, picked up my trail as I left the city. Anthony would be checking that I really had given up the investigation. He might watch to see that I did not stray from the George during my last night in the area. I wondered what he thought of the length of time that I had spent visiting his aunt. Had he simply sat and waited, or was he capable of further observations such as whether bedroom curtains were open or closed?.

I parked the MG in a very prominent position in front of the hotel. Sammie's Mini arrived less than five minutes later. As I had asked her at lunch time, she drove it around the back of the hotel, where a narrow lane led off in the direction of Lincoln.

I enquired the news from the latest assault on the massed ranks of ancient documents. Professor Loder sighed.

"Unfortunately the remainder of the papers were disorganised. We knew that they were uncatalogued, but this looked more like rummaged through."

"And did the rummager appear to know what he or she was looking for?" I asked.

"I can’t say that I’m well versed in forensic rummaging," Sammie replied. "However we found one or two things ourselves. For a start, the body is not Alice Compton; you remember, Lord George Kesford's supposedly unmarried niece? Apparently she’s another, like Caroline Rigg, who did marry after all. This time the reason for the absence of a record in the family tree may be that she married into trade."

"Which in Lord George's day would have been a terribly undignified thing to do," added the professor.

"Although by the end of the century the Delabors were into starch manufacture."

"We did talk about a century of change," he replied.

"They wouldn't have dealings with her," said Sammie. "She wrote several letters, though so far as we can tell they weren't replied to. The last letter from her was dated 1822."

"There was also some interesting material about the return of Lord George from the Peninsular War," said the professor. "Apparently it was on the direct orders of Wellington, for which Lord George never forgave him. He wasn't exactly cashiered, it seems, but he was invited to resign his commission; conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman."

"Excessive dalliance with the local floozies?" I suggested.

"Heavens, no!" said Professor Loder. "That was not considered unbecoming; it was almost compulsory. Things haven't changed that much."

"Drunkenness? Cowardice? Looting? Incompetence?"

"Members of the Peninsular Army happily got away with all of those; even embezzlement of quartermaster's funds. George was not an exemplary officer, but he was certainly not the worst around."

"Something must have been pretty far wrong for the Commander in Chief to take a personal interest," I said.

"Quite right," the professor agreed. "Charges of sacrilege were apparently brought against George by some Catholic clergymen. There was a bishop involved, so it must have been thought serious. But George was not a Catholic and not from a Catholic country, so I can’t understand why Wellington sided against him."

After dinner Sammie offered to run the professor home, but he insisted that a walk of such a short distance would do him good after a day spent poring over documents. I was relieved that Sammie did not have to move her car. We thanked him again for his assistance. Hardly had his slightly stooping frame passed through the front door of the hotel than I asked Sammie the obvious question.

"Was Lord George's dismissal to do with witchcraft?" Emanuel Loder couldn't spot any such clues, but she could and so could the catholic clergy who complained about him.

"I think you're probably right," she agreed, "but what would be enough to get him sent home in disgrace? Even if he was caught in the act they surely wouldn't have made this much fuss."

"Human sacrifice," I said. "He wouldn't have been able to cover that up."

"Now just wait a minute," she interjected. "This morning you asked if witches were into human sacrifice and I said I didn't know. What's suddenly made you so sure?"

I was trying hard to remember what, according to Sammie, I was supposed to know already and what I wasn't.

"I'm a detective," I said. "I've been pursuing my enquiries. I've nearly filled the pay phone box with all the change I've shovelled into it, because all my sources are in London. But look, how I found out is not the point. The fact is I've discovered enough evidence of human sacrifice to accept that it occurs. It's a branch of witchcraft called demonology. If George believed in it then the odds are greatly increased that the Delabors were similarly inclined. I'm willing to bet Victoria didn't go on the lam because of the shame. She'd hoped that young Porton would get her away from her family and when he didn't she had to run for her life!"

Sammie sighed. "You're too good for me," she admitted. "I was trying to shield you from stuff that I thought you didn't need to know. Once this sort of thing gets into your head it never lets you go. I didn't want you to end up a nervous wreck. You're not born to it."

"Sammie, you've got to stop holding out on me. We're in this together. I need to know everything!"

Sammie looked surprised and hurt. "What's come over you?" she asked. "I've just told you I was only trying to protect you. I thought you trusted me."

"Of course I trust you," I replied hotly. "How could I love someone I didn't trust?" The words were out before I had a chance to consider what I was saying.

Sammie's expression mellowed as quickly as it had soured. "You're saying you love me?"

Love means exposing the real you to the gaze of another person. It means being able to relate to a real person, not a two dimensional caricature that you build on a casual acquaintance. I would have to be Toby Le Tocq, not Philip Marlowe. I would have to live with the part of Sammie's life that I could not share; I would have to accept that she might have used a spell to attract me and not care. Was I ready for all of this? Perhaps I should have thought for more than the split second that intervened between her question and my answer.

"I'm saying I love you, yes," I confirmed.

She smiled almost shyly. "Do you know no-one has said that to me since ... since my parents died?"

So tender was that moment that the wish became father to conviction. I too had been holding back, on Raphael's advice.

Sammie's eyes were alight with joy. "I love you too."

I suddenly felt guilty about the afternoon, but not guilty enough to own up.

"I thought for a moment that Charlotte had won you over with her magic," Sammie smiled. I winced inwardly. "I can see that what you need is some more practice in getting your mind off things. Do you fancy an early night?"

"That is the best offer I've had since last night," I lied ,"but sadly my work is not yet finished for the day. I have a call to make. I should be back around two in the morning. Can you manage to wait that long?"

Love 'em and leave 'em. Was Marlowe back so soon? Had the image somehow become the reality whilst I wasn't looking? Could I really turn down such an offer in order to go out and work? I convinced myself with an effort that the job I had planned was vital to Sammie's safety and love making would have to wait; my first sacrifice on the altar of Aphrodite.

"Where are you going? I'll come with you," she said. Her mind seemed to be running a parallel course; no sooner have you declared your love for a man than he walks out on you. That does not happen in the best movies; cue the schmaltzy music and fade out. In the worst movies cue the gratuitous five minute unexpurgated sex scene. Sammie seemed quite happy to take either movie version, but not my prompt departure.

"No you will not," I replied. "For one thing, what I have to do is more than a little bit illegal; if anything goes wrong I don't want you involved. For another thing I might need an alibi; Anthony is still outside watching us, remember. My car is out front and he's sitting a hundred yards down the road keeping his eye on it; he won't quit for a while yet."

"You want to borrow my car," Sammie concluded. "That's why you had me park round the back. You want Anthony to think you're still here." She thought for a moment. "But you asked me to park at the back at lunch time. Why couldn't you make this call during the afternoon?"

"The kind of call I have in mind cannot really be made in the afternoon." I cast an eye at the wall clock. Eight forty and time I was off. "But amongst all my calls this afternoon I also made travel arrangements," I explained. "We won't need to rely on the ferry to get us to Jersey, because I've arranged to borrow the yacht that my partner keeps at Poole. We can go to Jersey when we like. Now I really have to be on my way. So can we commence my alibi by publicly looking like a loving couple on our way to the bedroom? But as soon as we're there I'm going out of the window."

Sammie put her arm round me as we walked out of the bar, but she said, "What if I won't lend you my car unless you take me along? I don't like you going out on some nefarious scheme and leaving me worrying here. I mean," she smiled, "you might scratch the car, or anything."

"I promise to look after the car," I said.

"Who are you going to burgle anyway?" she asked.

"Who said I was going to burgle anyone?" I protested

"What other illegal activities can only be conducted at night?" Sammie demanded. There was a touch of annoyance in her tone, so I thought I'd better come clean.

"I'm going to have a look around the private apartments at the Hall to see if I can find any evidence of occult activity, ancient or modern."

"Well then you do need me to come with you," she insisted. "I know my way around the Hall."

"You said you didn't know the codes for the bedroom alarms," I resisted, "and I never take anyone with me on a burglary. No offence, but it's not a job for amateurs. You do the spells; I do the breaking and entering, okay?"

"We could have sneaked into private apartments of the Hall in the daylight," she insisted. "There's no call to take silly risks."

"In the daylight, darling, the rooms are occupied," I replied. "Tonight they aren't. Anthony is watching us and Michael and Nadia are out to dinner."

"How do you know that?" Sammie asked accusingly. Then she smiled. "No, don't tell me, you're going to say 'I'm a detective,' again, aren't you?"

With a reasonable grace she accepted my decision. "Michael has a safe in his study; I've only seen him open it once or twice; there were a lot of papers in it, but whether there was anything occult I couldn't say. I always thought most witches did it all in their heads. Charlotte is by far the most powerful witch I've ever come across and I've never seen Charlotte writing anything down."

"But then, that's rather the point, isn't it?" I said. "If she has such material, you certainly wouldn't have been allowed to see it; and if Michael has you in mind for a victim, he'd be crazy to let you see any evidence of the fact."

"Toby," she hugged me to her as we entered the room, "promise me you'll be careful. I don't want to spend the holidays trying to get you out of Lincoln Gaol."

"I'm relieved that you think gaol is the worst that could happen," I replied. "I thought you were going to tell me that any such books would be bound to be protected by the most fearsome defensive spells."

"I was coming to that," she said. She removed the ruby necklace and hung it round my neck. "Don't take this off until you're back here with me; the power of this stone is capable of warding off anything that I know of. Touch it to your forehead when you enter the house and ask it to protect you against all evil." She may have seen a residual flicker of scepticism cross my face. "Toby!" she insisted, "Do it for me. Promise me that you will!"

I looked carefully at the curious pendant. Then I tucked it inside my jacket and kissed her as I opened the window. "I promise," I said.

"Toby," she said again, urgently, "if you feel a tingling sensation from the stone, get out of there as fast as you can. My mother told me that's how the stone will warn its wearer when the forces of darkness are too great to cope with. Are you sure you're listening to me? I've had enough tragedies in my life to be going on with; I don't need to lose my man as soon as I've found him."

I paused and kissed her and she responded fiercely. Tearing myself from her embrace was not the easiest thing that I have ever done. She pressed the car keys into my hand as I swung my leg over the sill. As I reached the small rear car park, I looked back and waved. Her small and vulnerable figure was still standing by the window, watching fearfully.

XIX - 1:00 Saturday 18th December

"Until the day break and the shadows flee away, turn my beloved, be thou like a roe,"

Despite her disparaging remarks about it, Doreen actually liked the MG. She expressed a measure of astonishment when I conducted her to the floral Mini. "What's this?" she exclaimed. "Have you been trading in your old scrap heap for a more up-to-date scrap heap?"

"I borrowed a car that would be less conspicuous," I said. "The MG is currently sitting outside a hotel giving me an alibi."

"And the owner of this car is sitting in a hotel bedroom assisting in the process, I expect," she returned. "Whatever possessed you to borrow this? It's about as inconspicuous as Blackpool Tower."

"In the context of this job, it's inconspicuous," I assured her. "It belongs to the niece of the owner of the target premises. It's been seen around the area regularly; no-one will pay it any attention."

Doreen looked unconvinced. "I shall feel conspicuous, if I have to sit alone in this contraption, no matter how famous it is," she said caustically. "She'll be a blonde, I assume, the owner? Long hair?"

"How did you guess?" I asked.

"You should know the Blomberg and Le Tocq Agency never guesses," she returned. "I know you, Toby; I came prepared."

As we stashed my black bag and Doreen's overnight bag in the back seat of the Mini, she extracted a Sainsbury's plastic carrier from the latter and installed herself in the passenger seat. By the time that I had walked round to the driver's door she was smoothing back the hair of a long blonde wig which had enough of a fringe to cover her own brown hair completely.

"There," she said, "Will I pass?"

I had to admit that to the casual observer, from a distance, or if the vehicle was moving, there would be no doubt that it was Sammie accompanying me in the car.

"This is not to say, mind you," Doreen continued, "that I don't think you are insane to be taking this sort of risk when there's no money in it. Were it not for the fact that you are a remarkably skilful burglar and that I find the idea of a spirit guide particularly intriguing, I should have brought a straitjacket with me instead of the black bag."

I drove the Mini out to the lay-by where I had had my encounter with the two ‘policemen’. This time it was deserted and the car was not being followed. I fished out my black trousers and sweater and my climbing shoes from the black bag and changed my clothes rapidly, standing beside the car. There was no need for false modesty with Doreen; in any case it was still perishing cold. I left off the balaclava until we arrived at Borminster Hall, since it was the one item of burglar's apparel that might look suspicious to the casual observer as we drove along.

"What are we after?" asked Doreen as I climbed back into the driver's seat and threw my day clothes into the back seat. "Fill me in on the details."

As we drove to the Hall I told her most of the story. As usual she complained that I was leaving out the juicy bits. I never knew a woman like Doreen for taking a vicarious interest in a man's amorous exploits; stone cold sober she would regularly ask the sort of intimate questions that your mate in the pub would take four or five pints to get around to. She could be forthright to the point of making me squirm at times. I felt like a fourteen year old hiding a pornographic magazine from his mother.

"In short," Doreen summarised, "you are screwing two witches, neither of whom knows that you're having it away with the other. Life with you is never dull, Toby, but this time you have excelled yourself. I think you are going to need help fairly shortly when the shit hits the fan."

"Neither of them is likely to talk about it to the other," I complained.

"Dear sweet boy," said Doreen, "I do love your naïveté. These two women hate each other, you say. Of course they are each going to find some way of making sure the other one knows who won! Your only hope is to ditch them both in favour of an obliging third party."

"So," I mused, "I have to choose between you and the Detective Sergeant?"

"Just remember, Toby, who knows where all the skeletons are buried," she warned.

"Why is it," I enquired of the world at large, "that every woman I meet these days keeps harping on about skeletons?"

We drove past the entrance to Borminster Hall and drew up in another ox-bow lay-by, out of sight of the main road, about a hundred yards further on. I reasoned that most late night visitors to the Hall were likely to come from the direction of Lincoln and that any passing police patrols were unlikely to inspect the lay-by and find the car. However, Doreen would be able to keep an eye on the entrance to the driveway and warn me of any arrivals via our walkie-talkie link. I had reckoned without my secretary's determination to be an active participant.

"I can watch the driveway equally well from the other end and from there I will also be able to watch the house for lights being switched on or anything else suggesting that you are in danger of being disturbed." She discarded the wig and pulled her own black outfit from the bag. "Are you going to watch?" she enquired. I averted my gaze as she effected a speedy transformation into burglar's assistant.

The sky was overcast and the night very dark. Carrying the black bag, we made our way along the fringes of the wood to the driveway, not wanting to risk observation by the occupants of any passing vehicle; but none came by. Once in the drive itself we stayed on the tarmac until we were within sight of the house and then stepped into the shadows of the trees. I gave Doreen a quick explanation of the geography of the place and which area I expected to be operating in.

There were still lights in the living rooms. This is the worst time on any burglary job. You sit around freezing to death with no conceivable explanation for being where you are, should you be discovered. By the time that the occupants have retired to bed your hands can be too numb to let you climb the walls. Since I was usually in search of information rather than valuables, I preferred to do a burglary whilst people were out rather than whilst they were in bed. I knew from Judith Silver that Michael and Nadia had gone to dinner with Gough. The Spanish housekeeper was my problem.

As luck would have it on this occasion however, we had scarcely been huddled in the shadows for five minutes when a light appeared at the front of the house and the sound of voices came distinctly to us across the distance separating the wood from the doorway under the front steps. The headlights of an elderly Morris Minor distinguished themselves from the gloom at the front of the house and the vehicle chugged slowly up the drive.

Doreen and I retreated a little further into the tree line as it approached; Mrs Pressley was just discernible behind the steering wheel. A minute or two later the house lights went off in the living area and a sequence of lights went on and off again in the direction leading to the housekeeper's rooms. A couple of floodlights now shone on the parking area, but mercifully it appeared that the National Trust had not yet got round to illuminating the façade. This showed a very proper concern for saving electricity, preserving the environment and assisting hard-working burglars.

"Well," I said to Doreen, "one little mystery is now explained. The village librarian knew my name because she and the housekeeper like to share milord's sherry when he's away from home. Ten minutes should be enough and then I'll go in; the longer I wait, the more chance that they'll come home before I'm through."

"Go now," said Doreen. "If she's going to bed, she'll be flushing the toilet, running water, making all kinds of noises that will cover up any sound you might make getting in."

"Doreen! Me ... make a noise?" I complained. Nevertheless I took her advice. The relatively early departure of Mrs Pressley might tend to indicate that Michael and Nadia were not gone for long and I did not know how much time I might need inside the house. From the black bag I took out my tool belt, back pack and a coil of climbing rope. The skiing balaclava covered almost all of my face; I was showing so little white skin as to be almost invisible on a dark night such as this. Doreen looked askance at the ruby necklace as I quickly tucked it inside the neck of my sweater.

"Don't ask!" I said. She didn't. We did a quick test of the walkie-talkie and then I set off at a jog across the open parkland towards the wall of the house below the long room.

I had taken the precaution the previous day of opening the catch of one window. In my experience it is always better to assume that you will have to break into the target premises than that you won't. Unless someone had been exceptionally observant it should be a simple matter to open the window. There was no alarm on the windows of the public rooms.

The ground storey of Borminster Hall was built of emerald-cut stone blocks which were deeply recessed at the upper and lower edges. I might have liked to use a piton to help me climb, but with the house occupied I couldn't risk the noise. In the event I was able to climb the face of the wall without difficulty. The cornice that ran along the face at first floor level was a good three inches wide. I could hardly complain that this breaking and entering was being made especially difficult for me and I wondered if I had missed some internal security device; there was after all a considerable wealth of paintings and furniture in the house, even if not much of it was of the first quality.

Well, if I had overlooked something I should soon find out; even if it was a silent alarm I could rely upon Doreen to give me sufficient advance warning of the arrival of any police car for me to make a smart departure through the rear of the house and into the walled garden. I reached the long room window within a couple of minutes of starting to climb.

As I had reckoned, it proved possible to stand on the cornice and push against the window. It didn't move. This isn't unusual for an old sash window; in fact I'd have been a bit surprised if it had. I took a jemmy from my belt and worked around the frame, breaking the paint seal between the frame and the window. Then I slid the jemmy under the bottom of the window and applied downward pressure to the end. The cornice under my feet felt a little crumbly and I was glad that the window didn't require too much leverage.

The jemmy raised the window sufficiently for me to get the fingers of my right hand underneath, whilst holding on to the frame with my left. The window rose another two feet and stuck. I removed the back pack and wriggled inside, legs first, pulling the pack behind me. Remembering Sammie's instruction, with just a little embarrassment I fished out the ruby, touched it to my forehead and muttered a request for protection. To be honest I preferred to rely on my own skill as usual.

I knew there were no magic-eye beams in the long room, but what I didn't know was whether the door would be locked from the outside. I closed the window and the catch. Then I made my way quietly past the disapproving portraits of former owners of the Hall, across to the door that gave on to the gallery. It was locked and the key was not in the other side of the lock. I took the headband light from my belt and inspected the lock in its dim glow. It was a straightforward old deadlock and with the tools from my kit I picked it in thirty seconds. Out in the gallery I locked the door again behind me.

There was the muffled sound of a radio or TV coming from some distance away in the direction of the housekeeper's quarters. No lights were on in the gallery and the moonlight through the windows was barely enough for me to make out the dim shapes of the benches along the wall. I retraced the route of my original visit until I found myself in the corridor outside the dining room. The rooms in this wing were not locked, but the red eye of the first motion detector of the inner alarm area was visible on the wall beyond the dining room door. I took out from my bag the viewer that allowed me to see the beam itself. It revealed a straightforward single beam system targeted on the opposite wall of the corridor and as usual the beam was two feet off the ground to prevent it being triggered by the family pets. It is wonderful how considerate to burglars a nation of animal lovers can be.

Lying on my back I wriggled under the beam and then pulled the bag through after me using my rope. There seemed to be no other alarm system, so cautiously I tried the first door. It was a snooker room; not a likely place to conceal what I was looking for. I located the study at my second attempt. The dark shape of a large desk loomed out of the shadows in the centre of the room and a drinks cabinet was on my left, close to the doorway; trust Michael never to be far from alcohol. Three metal filing cabinets were close beside each other beyond the drinks cabinet. A quick inspection revealed two were of the more modern type with built in locks and one had a simple padlock. Both types were so patently insecure that I could hardly believe anything sensitive would be contained in them, but I opened all three in any case and then inspected the contents one by one.

The first contained administrative details of the estate; relations with farmers, the National Trust and so on. I closed and locked it again. Even latex gloves can be a bit of a nuisance when you are picking very small locks like these, but I never take any chances with fingerprints; unfortunately it is an occupational hazard of being a private detective to have your fingerprints in police files; you are constantly being 'eliminated from enquiries.'

The second cabinet was more interesting; personal files on a large number of individuals. I flipped through to see if I recognised any names. Chief Constable Gough featured in the second drawer. I had neither time nor light enough from my headband to read the material; extracting the digital camera from my backpack, I carefully photographed some of the longer papers that the file contained and replaced the file in the cabinet. There were no files on members of the family, so far as I could see and I did not immediately recognise any other names.

I noticed that Gough's folder was a different shade from most of the rest and a quick check revealed that a few other similarly coloured dockets held details of members of the police force. It was terribly old fashioned to hold personnel files in this way; I wondered why Michael did not make use of a computerised database. With his banking experience he could not possibly be ignorant of information technology. Was witchcraft perhaps insufficiently up to date to have devised spells to ward off hackers?

I had as yet encountered no supernatural defences of any kind and indeed precious few natural ones. So far as I could see, Michael's study had less security than the village grocery; it certainly did not suggest that major secrets of the black arts were concealed here.

The third cabinet, the one with the padlock, was half empty. A superficial examination suggested that it contained family papers; birth, marriage and death certificates; insurances; income tax returns and so on. The second drawer however contained a folder concerned with Sammie. There were several photographs, the details of which were difficult to make out in the poor light and a number of hand-written and typewritten sheets. I photographed them all, without really expecting that the family would have committed much incriminating evidence to paper.

Across the other side of the room was a cupboard safe; cast iron, single door with combination lock and twist handle. It looked the best part of fifty years old and about as difficult for me to open as a can of sardines; listening carefully to the tumblers with a stethoscope from the back pack, it took me all of two minutes. The contents were sparse and did not appear to include any papers. There was a certain amount of jewellery and a parcel wrapped in soft cloth. I opened it carefully, in hopes that it might be an old book, but I was quickly disappointed.

The package contained a framed picture; an oil painting of a saint, complete with gold leaf halo, hand raised in a stylized blessing. Was this a smuggled icon? If so it seemed careless for Nadia to have it in her own house, but maybe she felt herself above suspicion. I photographed it too and replaced the wrappings in the way in which I had found them. There were no books in the safe and no other packages. I closed the door and twirled the combination to exactly the same setting in which I had found it. When I looked around the rest of the room there was no other obvious hiding place. The desk drawers were not locked and contained nothing of consequence.

An old Olivetti Pentium desktop computer, ancient enough to have a separate modem, sat on the desk next to the telephone. It was bound to be password protected. I had no decryption software available and I was far less confident of my ability to cover my tracks as a hacker than as a burglar. The fact that it was running unattended suggested to me that its most likely use was in connection with Michael's banking business anyway. I looked behind all the pictures for a wall safe, but found nothing. Back in the corridor, I scouted the remaining ground floor rooms. Then I made my way up an ornate flight of stairs to inspect the bedrooms. Most were furnished but appeared unoccupied.

I found just one locked door on the north side of the corridor, but again the lock appeared quite straightforward. However, when

I inserted my pick I found it impossible to move anything inside it. Was the room perhaps disused and the lock seized? I dabbed the end of the lock-pick against my finger and saw a smear of oil on the glove. There was a flickering glimmer of yellow light visible through the keyhole; a candle perhaps?

I tried my skeleton keys without success; one of them should have fitted; there was nothing modern about the lock. I did not want to force the door and leave evidence of my visit, but I was running out of options. I inserted the lock pick and felt again for some movement; there was still nothing.

It was a very long time since a lock had beaten me. Fred had found me a good teacher when I joined the firm. Jimmy 'Fingers' Roscoe, on one of his occasional holidays from Pentonville, had found me an apt pupil. Jimmy was very good with locks but very bad with alarms, being almost stone deaf. When the police found the perpetrator still on the premises when they rolled up five minutes after an alarm went off they used to make Jimmy odds on favourite. He had actually been caught in the act three times. I asked him once why he never took a partner who could hear rather better; Jimmy said that he preferred working alone. He was either one of the old school, or stupid, depending upon which way you chose to look at it, but he knew how to open any lock that was ever made. Jimmy would not have been pleased with his pupil's efforts at this ordinary bedroom door, but I really could not see what was preventing the lock from turning. Had I finally encountered a defensive spell?

Since my knowledge of counter spells was nil I was in danger of being thwarted and the more frustrated I became the more certain I was that this room held something important. Candles were connected with spells, Sammie had told me that; where there was evidence of the spells of the present generation of witches, there might well be evidence of the spells of an earlier one. With nothing to lose I decided to try one of my own. Summoning all my concentration I imagined the lock opening as I probed, the movement turning effortlessly. I threw in such magic words as I could remember; "Abracadabra, open sesame, so mote it be!" that kind of thing.

Well I either guessed the right spell or more likely struck lucky with the pick at the third attempt. The lock turned and I opened the door gently. Almost immediately there was a buzz from the walkie-talkie; that was Doreen asking if it was safe to talk. I buzzed back twice.

"Toby, have you hit some kind of silent alarm?" came a crackling whisper. "There's a blue light come on up on the roof right above you. It's pointing straight up in the air. Looks like a signal beacon to me. Over."

"I haven't seen any triggers," I replied. "But I just opened a locked door. Let me know if anyone comes. Ten minutes otherwise and I'm out of here. Over."

"Quick as you like," said Doreen. "Out."

What I had taken to be a bedroom was not. There was no furniture and no occupant, sleeping or otherwise. The floor was bare and appeared to be made of ceramic tiles. Most of the central part of the floor was taken up by a large diagram, standing out blackly against the pale background. I recognised the pentagram from the illustrations in the book, but it looked slightly odd. I would have expected its apex to point towards the window; this one appeared to be upside down. Its points were rather longer than the extended limbs of an average-sized person who might lie on the floor within it. There was a fireplace on the opposite wall to the window and on its mantelpiece were three silver candlesticks, in one of which there burned a solitary black candle. Its flickering light was very dim, but it had clearly not been burning for more than a couple of hours; there were still three or four inches of it left. Did Michael and Nadia intend to return before it was extinguished?

I could see no place of concealment in the room: no safes of any kind, no wall cupboards; there were no floor boards that could be lifted. I walked to the centre of the pentagram and examined its pentagonal centre-piece for seams in the tiles. It appeared that my idea was correct; the pentagon was removable; there were finger-holes on two sides. I lifted out the tile and shone my light into the space beneath. There was a compartment between this floor and the ceiling of the room beneath, but it contained no documents. It did however contain something; a small doll, quite crudely made out of wax, lay in the space. I picked it out of the shadow of the floor-space and examined it in the slightly better light afforded by the combination of the candle and my own light.

The doll had a few blonde hairs affixed to its head and what looked like a nail clipping attached to its fingers. Was it intended to represent Sammie? I rather expected to find the heart of the model pierced by a pin in the manner of a voodoo charm, but there was no pin here. Instead, the hands and the feet of the doll were each chained together by miniature shackles, made out of what appeared to be gold wire. It almost escaped my notice in the dim light that there was another tiny circlet of gold around the doll's neck.

I photographed the doll and replaced it carefully in the alcove beneath the floor. Then I put back the hatch in the same orientation from which I had lifted it. I moved over to the fireplace and checked it as thoroughly as I could, looking for more hidden compartments. A fire had burned recently in the grate. Since I understood that witchcraft frequently required nudity I could appreciate the need for a fire in this weather. However a fire also made it less likely that there would be concealed compartments inside the chimney itself. It was frustrating that I could find nothing else in what certainly appeared to be the critical room for my purposes, but with Doreen's warning still in my mind I felt an increasingly urgent need for departure. With a last look at the fireplace, I headed for the door.

I was less than half way across the floor when I felt a cold draught in the room. The candle flame guttered and went out, leaving my eyes unaccustomed to the suddenly increased darkness. One thing for which I was unprepared was the need to re-light candles; I carried no matches or lighter. The room had not been warm to start with, but now its temperature had very perceptibly dropped. As I stood for a moment in indecision, there was a clatter from behind me. I turned and saw that the dark shape of the central candlestick was no longer occupying its space on the mantelpiece; it had apparently fallen into the hearth.

At that moment I confess I felt a most primitive thrill of superstition. I was familiar enough with ghost stories to know that suddenly increased chill was supposed to denote the presence of ectoplasm. I was certain that nothing that I had done could have dislodged the candlestick. Nevertheless, if there were a ghostly presence in the witching room, at present it did not seem hostile. Something capable of moving candlesticks could presumably do more damaging things with them than drop them in the hearth. I went back to the hearth and picked up the candlestick. It seemed undamaged, but the candle had broken off almost level with the top of its holder. Without matches or a lighter there was no prospect of heating the wax to stick it back together and I could only hope that if I took away the broken section the casual observer might believe that the candle had burned away. I had little optimism that a witch would be a casual observer, but it was the best I could do. I slipped the piece of candle into a pocket and replaced the candlestick on the mantelpiece.

I had barely taken my hand away from it when the stump of the candle ignited. I took a startled step backwards. Spontaneous toppling of a burning candle might just possibly have been a matter of simple physics, but spontaneous combustion of a short and previously unlit portion of wick was not.

I looked at the candle for a moment and then said quietly, with as much calm as I could muster, "Very well, you have my attention. Now is there some point to this demonstration or are you just big on conjuring tricks?"

The flame of the candle flared very brightly for a second. As it did so, I saw what I had missed on my first inspection of the mantelpiece. What I had taken for a ridge of marble where the mantelpiece joined the wall was in fact a long continuous hinge and the mantelpiece could be raised like a box lid. I felt all around for some kind of catch and eventually found one in the shape of a delicately sculptured flower in the centre of the fireplace. Placing all three candlesticks in the hearth, I pushed up against the mantelpiece as I twisted the centre of the flower. The lid was remarkably heavy; a slab of solid marble not a wafer-thin veneer like modern imitations. It had to be held open, since it would not rest in the raised position, but the reflected glow still provided enough light for me to see the book concealed within. A surge of excitement mingled with my apprehension.

The book was old and hand written. In the poor light I could make out nothing at all. I photographed page after page as fast as I could. I was still working when the walkie-talkie buzzed again.

"Yes, Doreen," I acknowledged.

"Toby, get out now," came her agitated reply. "There is the most remarkable pyrotechnic display going on out here. Blue lights like flames all over the roof. I can hear a fire engine bell in the distance. We're going to have company very soon. Over."

"On my way, Doreen," I said.

I replaced the book and closed the mantelpiece, repositioning the candles as I had found them.

I hadn't quite finished my photography and I wasn't even sure it was the right book, but now was definitely not the time for detailed researches. The flickering light of the candle stump went out as I reached the door, which fortunately proved easier to lock behind me than it had to open. I rapidly descended to the ground floor, wriggled back under the beam and made my way out to the back exit which Sammie had showed me. It was a simple matter to let myself out and re-lock the door, but outside the Hall it was as bright as if the rear façade had been floodlit after all.

'Feu d'artifice,' we sometimes call firework displays in Jersey. I was not sure whose artifice might be involved here, but I guarantee you no-one had ever seen a burglar alarm like this before. Streamers of blue fire leapt and danced on the roof; there was a wailing noise like a great wind, but no smoke and, so far as I could see, nothing was actually being burned. I hugged such shadows as were cast by the wall, skirting the back of the house at a steady trot. I could hear the fire engine myself now; it must be almost turning into the drive. There was no way I would make it back to the trees in which Doreen was concealed before the vehicle arrived out in front, so I headed for the walled garden, intending to lie low there until there was sufficient confusion for me to escape unnoticed.

The ruby necklace, the existence of which I had almost forgotten, suddenly attracted my attention by provoking an unpleasant itch as it lay against the skin of my chest. As I moved closer to the walled garden the sensation became a burning which was almost painful. I crouched against the outside of the wall, behind a yew stump and pulled out the jewel. Although the light from the roof was sufficiently bright blue to colour the limestone of the wall, the ruby was glowing a fiery red as though it contained a miniature torch bulb. My fingers felt the heat of it through my gloves and I was sure that it would be as visible at a distance as a fog lamp. I considered putting it in the backpack, but on second thoughts I tied my handkerchief around the pendant and pushed it back inside my sweater. The happenings of the evening were sufficiently weird for me to believe that Sammie's injunction to wear the pendant at all times should be observed and I had no immediate prospect of getting away without being seen and possibly pursued as a suspected arsonist.

At the trot again I rounded the corner of the wall and made for the entrance to the garden. Inside the gate was an impenetrable blackness; for some strange reason the astral flames had no power to illuminate the confines of the garden. I looked back towards the house and was astonished to see the rooftop display completely blotted out by the dense foliage of a row of tall yews. I knew that these trees were not there, but nevertheless the space which they had occupied was starkly silhouetted against the flaming backdrop. Hardly a chink of light glimmered through the branches of the apparitions and the shade that they threw into the garden was total. From what I could make out the yews on the other three sides had also resumed their spectral sentry duty around the garden.

The slightly paler bulk of the parked excavator still lay where I had last seen it, a few feet from the entrance. I checked the door of the driver's cab and was grateful to find it open. Inside there was a reassuring smell of oil and dirt, whereas outside the frosty air carried more than a whiff of brimstone. The blackness closed in around me and the sound of the fire engine's bell, already muffled by the trees, fell silent as that vehicle arrived in front of the house. I was breathing hard and my heart was pounding, not from exertion but from alarm; I had no idea what was going on and I wasn’t sure that I liked it.

I gradually became aware that a shimmering phosphorescence was developing in the centre of the garden to my left. The statue of the nymph and satyr was beginning to glow with its own blue light and as the shadows flickered and shortened the illusion of movement became intense. I was sure that the gaze of the satyr turned in my direction and that its eyes could see right through my flimsy concealment.

Like a coal against my chest, the heat from the ruby burned through the handkerchief which swathed it; I dared not remove it. I saw beside the site of the open grave the figure of a man clad in shirt and breeches; his foot rested on a pile of earth as the picture of Lord George Kesford in the newspaper had rested on the fallen stag. Where Lord George's hand had held a musket, the spectre's hand held a spade. Beside him a woman in a diaphanous flowing robe stood looking into the grave and holding a flintlock pistol. Her hair was loose and flying every which way, although the yews blocked the wind from the roof as effectively as they blocked the light. Her eyes were wild, like someone on the edge of hysteria. Behind the two central characters two footmen in livery crouched over an iron bound oaken chest, which it seemed they had carried into the garden. These two men were plainly terrified, afraid to look at the scene before them. The man in breeches bent to open the chest, the contents of which seemed to sparkle with their own light. Then he looked up towards the statue and seemed to beckon to the beast to bring over his captive.

The statue did not move, but from behind it there slowly emerged a second young woman, clad similarly to the first. Her hair was also loose; a mass of ringlets cascading over her shoulders, but strangely not flying in the wind which buffeted the man’s companion. Around her neck I could clearly see a golden necklace. She paced slowly towards the quartet by the grave, as if in a trance; on reaching them, she turned her back on them and knelt down facing the grave.

The man in breeches put down his spade and picked up a book, from which he apparently began to read aloud, for his lips moved, though no sound came to me as I watched aghast from within the excavator cab. On instructions from the first woman, the two servants each lit a flambeau and stood back a few paces to the left and right. At another signal each dipped his flambeau towards the chest; so far as I could see they scarcely made any contact, but of a sudden a column of smoke gushed skyward from the chest and the contents disappeared. One of the servants was quaking so badly that he almost let fall his torch. With a look of triumph in her eyes the woman with the pistol raised it, steadying it with her other hand and fired at the kneeling figure.

I could not have intervened, had I wanted to, her movement was so swift, but in any case I was certain that what I was witnessing was not being enacted in the present day. Somehow, by some eddy of time, or by some power of a spell with which I had interfered, I was observing the 1799 murder. I have a fairly high threshold of fear, but this scene left me close to petrified. I was unsure whether, if I could see them, the actors in the drama could see me and if so what they might choose to do about it; but as I considered whether my safest course was to remain where I was or to make a bolt for the gateway and the parkland beyond, the garden began to fill with blue light. I looked up to see that the silhouettes of the old yews had vanished and the insubstantial flames on the roof of the Hall were clearly visible, though already subsiding in intensity. When I lowered my eyes again to the scene in the garden the ghosts were gone and I was alone.

As soon as I felt able, I got down from the cab and walked shakily and cautiously to the site of the grave.

It was undisturbed; the frost-rimed grass around it was not trampled; there was in fact no sign of recent footprints. The walkie-talkie buzzed.

"Yes, Doreen," I managed to say.

"Where are you, Toby?" she asked.

I told her that I was out the back in the walled garden and, since I could not immediately describe what I had just witnessed, I asked her what was going on at the front.

"Our heroic fire-fighters are mystified," Doreen replied. "Roof covered in flames and nothing actually burning. I've heard a couple of them talking bravely about St. Elmo's fire. Turntable ladder's up the façade right now investigating; you could say their attention is thoroughly absorbed."

"Very well," I told her. "Head back for the car. I’ll take a loop around and away from the house and try and stay out of sight. I’ll meet you there."

"Right you are, boss," came the crackling response.

As I set out at a jog away from the back of the Hall, swinging gradually left towards the wood which flanked the main road, I wondered how I could possibly explain to Doreen what I had seen. Did I believe it myself? The ghostly flames had been realistic enough; not only Doreen and I, but the fire crew and whoever had called them could testify to that. The local paper would have another field day on the subject of strange happenings at Borminster Hall. What would the enthusiastic newshound who had produced the article about Lord George have made of the scene in the garden?

If the weird tableau were not some hallucination, I now knew that the murderers were George and a woman that I took to be his wife; the latter obviously as deeply involved in witchcraft as her husband, despite not being of Rigg blood. "Witches marry witches," Sammie had said. Mrs Pressley was right that a woman had pulled the trigger and at close range. The Kesfords evidently knew enough of the ritual to use fire, but not enough to employ a furnace. The victim, whoever she was, had been a willing sacrifice if not hypnotised or drugged; perhaps the original contents of the chest would have been her own jewels. Sammie's idea of a sea chest was right. Although I had not seen the body placed in the chest, it seemed most likely that it had been buried either in it or with it. The servants would have kept quiet out of fear, as we had surmised

So well did the masque that I had witnessed fit the hypotheses that I had developed, that I wondered again if I might have hallucinated. I dismissed the idea. I was certainly not drunk nor, to the best of my knowledge, insane. Moreover, I was still rational enough to appreciate that, provided I got away from the Hall unseen, the arrival of the fire engine had done me a considerable favour. Any clues that I might inadvertently have left behind to alert anyone to my unlawful entry would be thoroughly obscured in the confusion, especially if the fire crew decided to force entry in order to rescue the housekeeper and went clomping about the interior in their great tackety boots. I decided that there would be time enough to analyse what had taken place later, when I was safely away from the scene of the crime.

I increased my pace as the activity at the front of the Hall came into my view, but there was a great spotlight shining from the fire engine on to the façade of the building. It seemed unlikely that anyone close to such a light would be able to see a black clad figure a hundred yards away in the gloom. I cut across the parkland to the wood, hopped over the boundary fence and stumbled through the underbrush to the lay-by where the Mini was parked.

Doreen, not known for her nervous disposition, was leaning against the side of the car, looking shaken and taking deep breaths. She started and then looked relieved as I approached. "Toby! Thank God! Did you see her?" she asked.

"See who? What's the matter?" I asked.

"There was a woman," she said, "wearing a long cape with a hood; carrying a storm lantern. She came away from the Hall right after I spoke to you; down the drive and off along the road towards the village. None of the firemen seemed to notice her, but I could see her clear as day. She stopped opposite where I was in the wood and turned and looked straight at me; then she sort of half-smiled and went on. Toby," she paused, then took a deep breath and continued, "I could see right through her; right across to the trees on the other side of the drive." Doreen flung her arms around me. "God, I was scared. Thank goodness you're here, what the Hell was going on back there?"

I gave her a hug and said, "Damned if I know, but we'll figure it out. I may have found what I was looking for in the Hall. Right now let's make ourselves scarce."

We climbed into the car and set off up the road in the direction of the village. We saw no woman on the way, caped or otherwise. When we were far enough from the Hall we stopped the car and changed back into our regular clothes. Doreen recovered the presence of mind to replace the wig before we arrived at the village, which was just as well, because a sizeable crowd had gathered to stare in the direction of the apparently burning Hall. We passed by without incident and drove round to the back of The George.

"It's not all that late," I said. "You can get a room here; they're nothing like full."

"I couldn't possibly sleep," said Doreen. "I should get back to London; officially I've never been here anyway."

"Go in the morning," I insisted. "You can take my car and the black bag. Take the camera and download all the pictures for me before I get back. You know the imaging software better than me anyway."

"I could perfectly well go now," said Doreen.

"For goodness sake woman," I insisted, "you've just seen a ghost! In the morning will be time enough. Check in on your own and treat the black bag like luggage. Mind, when you see me in the breakfast room, you don't know me." Doreen got the bag out of the car. "You go in first," I continued, "I'll give you a few minutes to get clear of Reception."

Then I had a strange thought. "By the way," I said. "Your ghostly lady in the cape; which hand did she have the lantern in?"

"Which hand?" Doreen repeated, screwing up her face and trying to recollect. "Why ... now you come to mention it, the left."

XX - 22.30 Saturday 18th December

"I sleep but my heart waketh"

Once Doreen had gone inside I sat in the car for a couple of minutes to get my head straight. If I had been in any doubt about the supernatural nature of the goings on around Borminster I could really be so no longer.

All right, the fire might have been a phosphorescent atmospheric phenomenon, but how often do you come across those in Lincolnshire? By coincidence this outbreak of St Elmo's fire had coincided with my hallucinating about the events in the walled garden and Doreen hallucinating about the woman in the cape? And all these coincidences had further coincided with a slight earthquake that had dislodged the candle in the witching room and a charge of static electricity that had ignited the candle stump? Meanwhile no doubt I had missed noticing that I had won the National Lottery despite not buying a ticket.

So far as I know Marlowe never had to deal with the supernatural. From now on this investigation had to be down to Toby Le Tocq and in the aftermath of all this action Toby was just a touch on the unnerved side of worried. I might not have been in shock after the beating but I was now.

I knew pretty well what to expect from human beings; physical violence I understood; threats I understood; bribery and sexual favours used as a distraction I understood. Witchcraft and ghosts I did not understand and my earlier confidence that I could cope with whatever they threw at me was beginning to evaporate. I took a deep breath and steadied myself. There was no harm done and no injury suffered, except perhaps a dent in my sanity.

I could hardly say I lived to fight another day since I had as yet done no fighting. Whatever I had encountered in the witching room had not been hostile and had been instrumental in my making what might turn out to be an important discovery. Ghost, witch, or force of nature; something had assisted me to stumble through the night and remain unscathed.

The heat in the hotel bedroom struck me as though I had opened the door of a furnace. I had been too active to be cold, but the night was frosty and my breath had hung in the air like smoke as I walked in from the rear car park. Sammie had the central heating turned up to maximum and both bars of the coal effect electric fire burning as well. At first I thought she was asleep, as she lay on the bed covered only by a single sheet, with the downy lying on the floor at the foot of the bed. However as I closed the door quietly behind me, her eyelids fluttered and she was instantly awake, looking tired but concerned.

"Toby," she said, "oh, thank goodness you're all right."

"Oh ye of little faith," I replied. "I had lessons from a master cracksman."

"I didn't mean the burglary," she returned. "You know what I meant."

"Your mother's ruby did a good job," I acknowledged. "God knows what was going on out there, but I seem to be in one piece."

"So there was a defensive spell? Tell me what happened." She sat up in bed as I came over and sat beside her. Like her aunt, she seemed to disdain the use of nightgowns. Her body was beautiful and her arms inviting; even if my wits had not already been disordered by the night's experiences, I might have found it difficult to concentrate on telling my story. Nevertheless, though her embrace was passionate, her self control asserted itself swiftly and her hands pushed against my chest.

"No," she insisted, "tell me what happened first."

"Well, they have a file on you for a start," I said. I described the events of the evening, omitting the discovery of the icon because I hadn't yet explained to Sammie my involvement with Detective Sergeant Silver. Sammie seemed untroubled by the file.

When I came to relate the happenings in the witching room however, her eyes lit up and she demanded minute detail. She frowned at my description of the doll.

"It could easily be my hair and nails," she said. "I lived with Charlotte for years; the stuff wouldn't have to be recently taken for the spell to work."

"What sort of spell requires a doll to be put under the floor like that?" I asked.

"Work it out for yourself," she said with a shiver.

I was very much afraid that I could do so all too easily.

"The witching room is maybe magically twinned with some place outside in the open air? Probably the walled garden; that's where they killed before. The shackled doll is meant to be the human sacrifice victim who will be buried in the garden?"

"Nearly," Sammie confirmed. "The victim will be buried, but not with shackles. They are part of the spell; it's supposed to bind her to her fate." The alarm bell tinkled faintly in my brain again. Sammie certainly knew about black magic.

"And the necklace?" I asked. "Do they know that you still have the necklace?"

"The only way they could know that," she said, "is if they looked inside the coffin and saw that I haven't returned it yet. I think we can be reasonably confident on that score. Michael gave me the necklace to put back because he wanted me to be the last person who touched it before the coven worked the spell." She snuggled against me.

"The necklace is a charm like my mother's, but an evil one. They won't want to handle it until the last possible moment before the funeral on Tuesday. They'd have meant to take it out of the coffin using gloves and special charms. A good job it won't be there."

"What?" I blinked. "Why won't it be there? Aren't you going to return it? Won't that give the game away?"

"The real one won't be there," she grinned, "because I'm having it copied. There's a very helpful jobbing jeweller in Cambridge, beavering away to manufacture a fake over the weekend; an expensive fake; real gold plate. It has to be gold to hold any charm, whether theirs or mine. The estimate was an arm and a leg, with another foot thrown in for doing a rush job."

"But if you already knew the necklace was something sinister," I expostulated, "why didn't you tell me?"

"Toby, I've already told you I'm trying to keep you as far away from the worst of this magic as I can," she soothed. "I don't want it to mess with your mind and anyway I can't protect both of us at the same time outside the sanctuary of my own room. That's what I told you last night, remember. That's why I gave you mother's charm tonight. What do you suppose was protecting me whilst you were away?"

That struck home; I ought to have realised that Sammie herself could have been endangered by what I had been up to. I'd never thought of that. For a moment I was seriously disconcerted that I had so carelessly put her at risk.

"You shouldn't have done it," I whispered. "I shouldn't have taken it."

"Nonsense," she said, giving me a gentle kiss. "It worked didn't it? And I'm still safe too aren't I?"

"How did you know that the necklace was charmed?" I asked.

"Remember I said I recognised it from the George Romney painting of Lady Anne Kesford in the library? Well, it was the necklace that I recognised, not the pendant. When Michael gave the necklace to me, the pendant was an ordinary crucifix. I went and checked the portrait again and sure enough it was the same crucifix there too."

"So?" I was mystified. "Isn't that what you would have expected?"

"Not if you were a historian with a particular interest in eighteenth century art who happened to work as a guide round the Hall last summer," she smiled. "I remembered the necklace as having a different pendant. I gave the painting a very sophisticated inspection in the area of the necklace. To be exact I poked it. The paint had been baked dry on the surface right enough, but it was still soft underneath."

"They'd retouched a George Romney?" I was astonished that anyone would take such liberties with something so valuable. "Was it an expert job?"

"First class work," Sammie nodded. "No-one would have noticed, except someone who knew what the painting looked like before."

"And what exactly was it about the way it looked before that made it stick in your mind?" I queried.

"It was just like my mother's pendant," she said quietly, "except it was a sapphire. Rubies and sapphires are essentially the same mineral, you know? They just have different extraneous ingredients that change the colour."

The past and the present seemed suddenly conjoined. The shackles on the doll might be metaphorical, but the chains which bound the twentieth century Riggs to their eighteenth century ancestors and to other, older, followers of the craft were real.

Sammie's revelation explained a few things. Gough and Sir Michael had been undisturbed when Sammie had told me about the necklace, because the coven had disguised the necklace and the painting to avoid arousing her suspicions. How had the necklace come to be taken away 'for forensic examination' and returned without any word of its existence reaching the papers? Well, presumably those who could fix it for police cars to go missing from their service areas could also fix it for forensic exhibits to go missing from the laboratories. I took the ruby pendant from inside my sweater and unwrapped it. Sammie's eyes widened.

"You felt it?" she exclaimed. "The tingling? Is that why you wrapped it up?"

"To be honest it was a bit more than a tingling," I said. "Rather like going around with a hot coal down your vest."

Sammie looked very serious. "Was it in the witching room that you felt it?" she asked.

"No, afterwards, outside near the walled garden," I replied.

That was how I happened to skip the bit of my story about finding the book. I hadn't meant to keep it from her, although I wasn't sure how I could keep my promise to Raphael and still discuss with Sammie what I knew about the *Clavicula Solomonis*. But the tableau in the garden was still so vivid in my mind that I was easily drawn into talking about that and the ghostly trees and the blue flames on the roof that somehow weren't real flames, although they had attracted the fire engine.

"There was a hell of a racket," I said as I came to the end of my account. "Half the population of the village is still out in the streets looking down the road at the fire. I'm surprised you slept through it."

"I wasn't really asleep," she said. "I was too frightened for you. But I'm awfully tired; one way and another it took a lot out of me last night."

She looked tired too; in fact she looked as though the strain had all but exhausted her. I gently pushed her back down in the bed and started to undress.

"Do you mind if I turn the heat down and put the downy back on the bed?" I asked. "It's awfully stuffy in here."

Sammie said nothing. When I looked back at her I saw she was already asleep. So much for my skill as a narrator of ghost stories. My adrenaline was still running pretty high, but it had been a hard day for me too, not to mention bruising.

I got into bed thinking I would never sleep, but I did, although I was troubled by strange dreams in which the female roles from the garden tableau were replayed by Sammie and Charlotte whilst I was George, looking on and doing nothing.

XXI - 09:00 Sunday 19th December

"Rise up my love, my fair one and come away,"

"Wake up!" said Sammie, shaking me. "Toby, wake up, your car's been stolen!"

I groaned and stretched muscles that ached and seemed to have been turned into throbbing lumps overnight as a result of the attentions of the fake policemen. I was still young enough not to feel physical damage too badly as long as I remained active, but a night's sleep tied me in knots. Sammie was fully dressed.

"I went out for a Sunday paper," she said urgently. "Your car's not there."

"That's all right," I groaned again, just about awake. "I arranged for someone from the agency to come up by train and take it back to London for me; probably got an early start. What time is it?" I struggled to focus my eyes on the digital clock built into the TV at the opposite side of the room.

"Nine o'clock nearly," said Sammie. "I'm sorry. If you'd told me, I wouldn't have woken you. You looked pretty shattered last night; we both were in fact."

"I'm feeling fine now though," I replied, taking a few liberties with the truth. "Now where were we before we were so rudely interrupted by the sand man?"

Sammie twisted out of my grasp with a grin. "Going down for breakfast and then off to Cambridge, pronto. I don't want you around here any longer than necessary; your friendly neighbourhood thugs might decide to move up their deadline."

I rather hoped that those hounds might be called off the scent if Charlotte had started to spread the word that I might be useful after all; but of course she might not have been able to get in touch with her husband at such short notice; I didn't know and I was not anxious to test my theory. I co-operated meekly with Sammie's efforts to hustle me away and we were on the road in the Mini before ten, with Sammie at the wheel. As we drove, I began thinking again about the necklace.

"If they have the real pendant hidden somewhere," I said thoughtfully, "it was in none of the places I searched last night."

"Charlotte will have it," Sammie replied tersely. "Or to be more exact, Fisto will have it under the cushion in his basket. Remember what I said about the familiar being used to insulate a witch from spells."

"So why, if you knew it was there the night before last, did you not do something about it?" I demanded

Sammie smiled and shook her head. "How many times do I have to tell you that Charlotte is very powerful? It was all I could do to look after the two of us. Anyway," she giggled, "You distracted me."

A delivery van sped by in the opposite direction and the driver made a rude gesture as if to endorse her remark. I was glad she could still laugh about it and I suppose I was flattered that she thought me diverting enough.

"What's the idea then?" I asked. "Sometime between the re-interment and New Year's Eve they'll put the necklace and the pendant back together again, is that it?"

"That would have been it," she confirmed. "As I said, the complete necklace would have carried a charm."

"The victim in my vision last night appeared to be willing."

"That would be why," Sammie reflected. "She must have been under a seriously strong spell; it isn't easy to put someone under enough influence that they'll allow themselves to be harmed, let alone killed."

"Will it break the spell if you substitute a replica necklace?" I asked

"No, only weaken it." She shook her head, whilst still concentrating on the road. "The greater part of the charm is in the stone, just as it is with mother's ruby; but it will be less effective with the wrong necklace, especially if the necklace has been subjected to a counter-charm."

A pendant charm had to be worn for it to work, she explained; the necklace transmitting the power of the stone around the neck of the victim and completing a magic circle around her head, one that in this case took control of her brain. The spell would not work if the pendant were carried in her pocket or her handbag, say, but, once the necklace had been put on, it would not be possible for her simply to take it off; at that point she would have to trust her defensive spells.

"Just as well I wrapped up the ruby last night instead of taking it off and putting it in my backpack," I mused.

Sammie's face registered a certain amount of shock. She glanced briefly away from the road ahead. "Did you activate it and then consider taking it off?" she gasped. "Good grief, Toby, you must never back out on a spell half way through. Even when you know it's going wrong, you go through with it; if you quit, not only will you suffer from whatever's being used against you, but your own spell will be turned back on you too."

A bit like cricket, I thought. When I played for the school cricket team, the coach was always telling me never to check my stroke, even if I realised half way through that the ball wasn't there to be hit.

"There are more batsmen caught off half hearted strokes than full blooded ones, my cricket coach used to say. It’s best not to slash, but if you're going to slash, slash hard!"

Sammie did not seem amused. "I’m serious!" she exclaimed. "If you'd taken off the necklace last night, I doubt if you'd be here now. Toby I told you that you must do as I say about witchcraft! I can see that life with you is going to be one infuriating frustration after another."

"Oh," I responded, "frustration? Surely not?"

She grinned in spite of her attempt to be stern. "Well maybe not. But please, last night should have convinced you that there are forces out there that you can't begin to cope with until you understand them. Trust me and do as I say!"

"We can still hope, of course," I said, "that you never have to put your defensive spell to the test. Why can’t we just get you right away from Borminster on New Year's Eve?"

"Like Jersey for instance?" Sammie gave a wry look. "I can't do that and you know it. I may not owe Charlotte and Michael any favours, but not all of my cousins are as repulsive as Anthony; some of them wouldn't have a clue what was going on and the power is so weak in them that they couldn't protect themselves at all if the coven should decide to look for a substitute for me."

"And since when is it strong in you?" I asked.

"That's not the point, Toby. You know perfectly well that, if I am the target, I can protect everyone else simply by being there; and I'm well enough prepared to have a fair chance of protecting myself too; at least I'll give it my best shot. I told you before; I'm a big girl now."

I wasn't happy that Sammie should put herself at risk, but her courage had to be admired and her logic could not be faulted. I had said as much to Raphael. That meant I needed to understand more about the rite that I had witnessed. If I was to be any use to her, if and when it came to a repetition of the ceremony, I had to know exactly what was going on.

"Tell me what you know about gateways," I said. The Mini's engine rose a note as Sammie pulled out to overtake a lorry.

"What a detective you are!" she growled. "Here am I trying to protect you from this stuff and there you go finding out about it without me. I assume you mean magic gateways not the wrought iron variety?"

"George Kesford's human sacrifices were part of something called a gateway ritual. The jewels in the chest in my vision literally disappeared in a puff of smoke. I think he sent them through a gateway and expected something in return."

Sammie was reluctant, but she could tell that I'd worked out most of this already. She never took her eyes of the road as she filled in the gaps for me. "Black magic taps forces from The Void outside space and time. You couldn't open a connection between our world and The Void for more than an instant unless you possessed enormous powers. That's very fortunate really, because no-one knows what sort of chaos would flood through into the world if you could. A gateway is what you call an opening into The Void that a black witch creates for the purpose of summoning a specific named demon."

"My physics teacher told us that the dimensions of the universe included time and outside the universe there was nothing, that is to say a void," I said thoughtfully.

I had always struggled with the difference between the universe's interior space and exterior void; he had explained that apparently empty space was not in fact empty, but contained all sorts of things, not just suns and planets but gases and waves and all sorts of particles; the exterior void however was just nothingness.

Witches, however, seemed to believe that The Void was inhabited by demons. These demonic inhabitants of The Void presumably included the many baalim of whom Raphael had told me. Apparently however The Void somehow co-existed with the universe in such a way that a gateway between the two could be opened on Earth, that is to say in the middle of the universe rather than on the edge.

"All I know," Sammie said, "was what my mother warned me against. Maybe she intended to tell me more when I was old enough to understand, you know, but she never had the chance. It isn't the sort of thing you learn from library books and Charlotte was obviously not about to tell me about it."

The Mini droned along whilst we sat in silence for a few minutes. If Sammie could not tell me more, I could still figure out some of this for myself.

It seemed likely that something inhabiting a world outside time would be immortal. Quite how one went about inhabiting a world without space I wasn't sure. Space is required in order to distinguish one individual from another. An important difference between me and you is that I occupy my space and you don't, at least not at the same time as I do. If demons occupied a world without space then they had no physical bodies. But if demons had names then presumably they had individual personalities and individual powers. Somehow they were distinguished from each other. If they could be summoned from The Void then it followed that when they emerged they would need a physical form, or at least a means of interacting with those who summoned them.

If powerful witches found it worthwhile to summon them, then presumably the demons had powers that the witches themselves did not possess; on the other hand you would be a fool to summon something that you didn’t at least expect to be able to control. According to Raphael you would need to be the right person and to know the right cantrip.

"So what do you suppose they were trying to call through this gateway?" I asked Sammie when I had reached this point in my analysis.

"Who can tell?" she said.

"Maybe something that had previously been called out by Mary Bullivant?" I suggested. "Something that Mary Bullivant told them about as she died?"

Sammie again took her eyes off the road briefly to look across at me; then her concentration snapped back into place. "Could be," she said.

"Sammie," I complained, "remember what I said about being straight with me. You didn't come to Borminster to investigate this body because of a disinterested concern for local history. As soon as you heard about it, you thought of Mary Bullivant's curse and you knew that there was going to be trouble around the Millennium. Now that's the truth, isn't it? It doesn't make any sense that an intelligent female member of your family should be aware of this and not figure out that they could be this century's victim."

"You know," said Sammie, "you really are one smart detective. Remind me to make use of your services in the future to keep an eye on my husband if he starts cheating on me."

I was comprehensively outmanoeuvred. I was reminded of what Raphael had told me about the fate of men that witches selected as their mates. "Oh, don't worry lady," I laughed, "I won't let him out of my sight."

Sammie laughed too. "I suppose I should have been honest with you from the start," she said, "but I wasn't sure of you at first, was I? I had no choice but to leave you with Charlotte that first night and I didn't know what she might have been able to do to you; you might have been completely under her spell when I saw you the next day."

"Charlotte's eye problem," I said, "that wouldn't by any chance have anything to do with a certain picture on the wall of your bed-sit; the one that you can stick a dart in at ten paces?"

"That would be telling," said Sammie. "Anyway, I thought you needed all the help you could get." She smiled. "So, if you could see the necklace clearly when you were in the garden last night," she said changing the subject quickly, "could you not see the face of the victim? We have it narrowed down to two women. It might help if you could have another look at the guide book photographs of the two paintings."

"I could see the necklace because it reflected the light from the torches and I could see the victim's hair because it was quite pale in colour, but I couldn't pick her out in an identity parade of the strength of what I saw of her face. If I were to stare at the paintings for long enough, I might very well persuade myself that it was one of them, but I would rather trust your friend's computer program. I really only recognised Lord George by his clothing too; it could have been someone else."

"Oh no, it was him all right and his wife who went mad." I must have described the scene very realistically; Sammie spoke almost as though she had been present. "You know, I knew I was right about that sea chest."

"But what I can’t understand is why he would still be doing this sort of thing years after the turn of the century?" I asked, still puzzled. "Wouldn't this gateway thing be a one-off phenomenon in 1799?"

"I suppose he may have developed a taste for it," Sammie replied. "They do say, don't they, that the first killing is always the most difficult? What is it Macbeth says about being ‘stepped in blood so far that go back were now as tedious as go o'er?’"

Macbeth had been written for James I, the one who had been obsessive about the old religion. So far as I recalled however, Macbeth's dalliance with witches had brought him to a sticky end; I was not impressed by the parallel. Mind you his witches, as I recalled, had been old hags and mine wasn’t.

"The accused, M’lud," I intoned, "asks for fifty other cases of human sacrifice to be taken into consideration. He lays the blame on a deprived childhood and neglectful parents who let him get into bad habits."

"Well, how do I know?" Sammie protested. "I told you you're asking a novice; even though I might know a little more than I let on to begin with. I gather the theory is that if a witch can gain control of even a tiny fragment of the forces of The Void, he or she could literally rule the world, but the much more likely outcome is insanity. My mother made it quite clear that messing with demons was a serious no-no. Personally," she said as she smiled quickly across at me, "I never had any interest in ruling the world, or in doing anything else involving demons for that matter; I still don’t. Once we have this business behind us I fancy a nice long holiday somewhere warm. How do you like Barbados?"

"I told you the truth too," I said, "I get claustrophobia on small islands. Anyhow, aren't you supposed to be writing a thesis, Dr Chalmers?"

"I still might," she laughed, "though it's more likely to be published by the Occult Book Society than the Cambridge University Press!"

XXII - 12.00 Sunday 19th December

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for thy love is better than wine."

"There's something you can do for me," said Sammie as we dropped the bags on the floor of her bedsit in Cambridge.

"Make lunch?" I enquired naively.

"Not quite," she said, "but close; just a slight correction to the last consonant sound." She was in my arms in an instant, with her hands behind my neck, pulling my head down to her level. "Mmm," she said, as she drew back for a moment, "Do you know, you are too tall; I need to stand on an orange box."

"This is less of a problem than you think," I replied. "Toby the magician has powerful sorcery to overcome even this fearful obstacle." I picked her up and carried her over to the single bed.

"You'll drop me!" she squeaked.

"Are you fragile, or is the mattress stuffed with concrete?" I asked. I laid her down gently and helped her out of her jacket. As I hung it over a chair, my eyes caught sight of the scrap of parchment, still in the top pocket where I had replaced it. " Well," I thought to myself, "who gives a damn? She really didn't need to try that hard."

Sammie was already wriggling out of her skirt when I turned back to the bed. She seemed half embarrassed as I looked at her. I stooped and kissed the nervous smile from her lips.

"You think I'm too forward, don't you?" she said.

"I'm a straightforward kind of guy too," I replied. "When you upset me, I'll let you know."

Sammie did look fragile, now I looked at her lying there, like a butterfly just emerged from the chrysalis, tentatively spreading her newly discovered wings to dry in the spring sunshine. I felt an overpowering need to protect her, no matter what evil was ranged against us. I am afraid that Doreen's warning went completely out of my head. By the middle of the afternoon, we still hadn't had lunch.

She took control even more firmly than she had the first time. I was like frail barque in a tempest despite my size and weight. She spun me on to my back and knelt astride me, rocking rhythmically; her eyes closed, her arms forward and her hands pressing down on my shoulders. Once again it lasted far beyond any normal endurance of mine. She had the ability to bring me to the point of imminent orgasm and then somehow, agonisingly, ecstatically, to hold me there in a fever of anticipation. This time she began to mutter to herself; words that I could not catch; as she approached climax she leaned back and moved her hands behind her to rest on my thighs; again her head went back and her body arched; she gave an ecstatic cry that seemed to drift around the room. For me the universe exploded. A few moments later she slipped forward and nestled her head against my neck.

"Are you sure your name is Tobias?" she said, just as before.

"Much more of this and I'll answer to any name you care to give me," I gasped, "Provided, that is, I am still capable of speech. Anyway, you're one to talk, Semiramis."

Sammie gave a little start. "Oh no!" she wailed. "Who grassed me up?"

"I'm a detective," I smiled tenderly. "And it's a nice name, I think. Semiramis was a Queen of Assyria who was worshipped as a goddess."

"She's just another old legend and it's an embarrassing name to have in 1999. I don't answer to that name anyway. Sammie is the name I gave myself and I like it."

"Have it your way, Sammie," I said.

How long we lay in each other's arms I cannot say. It was a delicious exhaustion. I may have dozed. Finally Sammie broke the silence.

"I should ring Myra and see how she's getting on with the skull," she said drowsily.

"Does she work Sundays?" I asked.

"Don't be silly, the computer doesn't care what day it is," she replied. "Myra knows I don't have much time and it's easier to get time on the mainframe on Sundays than it is through the week."

She got up from the bed, wrapped herself in a large towel from a drying rack at the far end of the room and then she sat down at her small desk, where a PC and a laser printer competed for space with a clutter of books and papers. The PC seemed to take longer to boot up than Sammie took to make the connection; she was obviously a very skilful operator.

"That's how you ring people, is it?" I said. "I was labouring under this old fashioned misconception that you meant the telephone."

"This saves a lot of time," she replied. "If she's not home, I can route the same message through to the lab. If she has a picture, she can send it straight down the line to me and we can print out a hard copy here. Yes, Myra, I'm fine …" her hands flew over the keys as she spoke. "Now let's get on with it shall we?"

Written real time exchanges over a computer link had always seemed a rather slow and laborious alternative to the telephone to me, but Sammie and her friend were both fast and accurate typists. The conversation was completed in a couple of minutes; I suppose one is less inclined to chat if all the small talk has to be written down; it had to be a telephone company that pioneered computer voice transmission systems.

"Bingo!" exclaimed Sammie delightedly.

"What's up, doc?" I asked; the smile on her face suggested the news was very good.

"Myra reckons the girl died between 1795 and 1805," she replied. "That puts our 1799 theory squarely in the middle. The mock up of her face is downloading now."

I went over and stood behind her at the desk, with my hands on her bare shoulders and, although I found the view of the contents of the towel distracting from above, Sammie was watching in fascination as the picture slowly resolved on the monitor.

"I have to get myself something modern," said Sammie, wriggling her shoulders playfully as we waited. "This Pentium is out of the Ark. It takes for ever to download a graphic with this much resolution." Blomberg and Le Tocq were still making do with a 486 that had been the last word when we bought it soon after I joined the firm in 1994; we had just backed up all the files in case it succumbed to the Millennium bug; Y2K proof we were not. I kept my mouth shut.

The picture which was materialising on the screen was bald-headed but the features were clear. When she had saved the image, Sammie copied it into a graphics package and used that to supply the flesh tones, eyes and Regency hairstyle. I fished out the guidebook from my bag and looked for the reproductions of the two paintings.

"Hester Rigg," I said, matter-of-factly.

"Are you sure?" Sammie asked.

"Without a shadow of a doubt," I replied. "See for yourself."

The match was very close. The two images could have been produced of the same sitter, not more than a few months apart. Hester was Lord George's niece; his dead brother's daughter; the parallel was as uncomfortably close as the two likenesses.

"Well, it's what I expected, I suppose," Sammie sighed. "I was kidding myself along that it might have been Leticia Tansworthy, but she was a more distant relative; the power might have been weak in her and she would have been a less acceptable sacrifice. Hester might have been a full-blown witch herself for all we know; she certainly would have had it in her to be one if she'd wanted."

"Like you," I said.

"Yes like me," Sammie replied, "The operative words, Toby, were 'if she'd wanted.' I never wanted; maybe Hester did, maybe she didn't."

It seemed to me that being a witch would also have made Hester more difficult to trap; if she was not a willing victim, a witch could not have failed to know what her uncle was up to. Looking at Hester's picture, I thought that she had a very intelligent face; she certainly didn't look like some empty headed bit of fluff that had spent all her life being sheltered from society. I could imagine Hester bowling 'em over back in the 1790's; she was certainly attractive enough to have been well noticed.

"She's very pretty; why do you suppose no disappointed male admirers asked embarrassing questions?" I asked Sammie.

"We don't know they didn't," she replied. "If Lord George said that she'd gone to live with an aunt in America no-one could easily have proved otherwise and it was far less easy to check than it would be today. And remember her male admirers would not have known her as well as ... well, as we do for example." She looked up at me and flicked her tongue over her lips lasciviously.

"In her class of society there was no such thing as a casual friendship with the opposite sex. You would meet her perhaps at a ball or a dinner and then you'd have to ask her father's permission to pay court to her. Maybe no-one was ever given such permission because the family knew her destiny, whether or not she knew it herself."

"Alice Compton was a precedent for headstrong females of this family to go on the run," I said. "If Hester had known what Lord George was doing, she could have bolted too, I suppose. If she chose not to, then maybe she thought she had enough power to resist." Rather like you was the unsubtle implication.

"Go on, cheer me up!" Sammie chided.

"With all the advantages that we have over Hester, we still have nothing resembling evidence that an outsider would even take seriously, let alone that might convict anyone in a court of law," I said seriously. "We have no proof that Michael and Charlotte really mean to hold anything more than a Millennium party."

"That's why we're going to trace Victoria," Sammie replied. "Four centennial deaths in row would be at the very least circumstantial evidence of a threat. But you're right, we have to do this all by ourselves; beginning tomorrow when I'll collect the skull and my fake necklace and get them back to Borminster."

I tried to insist that she shouldn't go back to Borminster without me.

"What can they do to me?" she protested. "Lock me up for a fortnight? They need me alive and well and unsuspecting until as close to New Year's Eve as possible. The less time they need to control me by magic, the less time there is for anything to go wrong. I'll be down to Borminster and back in a day. For goodness sake, stop worrying Toby. Remember what I said."

"About a positive mental attitude?"

"Exactly! If you came with me you would simply draw the attention of the heavies for no purpose. If anyone asks me about our investigation, I'll tell them we drew a blank and split up."

That was the right tactic. No-one must suspect that we knew who the body was or they might panic and try to stop Sammie leaving.

"A few days ago," I said, "I thought a crime of passion was the most likely explanation. I can still hardly believe the real story."

"Well either you consumed a whole lot of whisky last night or you really did see ghosts." Sammie put her hands around my neck again and grinned. "Let's check. Did you see any pink elephants as you were coming down the stairs?"

"Oh sure," I said, "and one of them telephoned for the fire engine."

"Mm, yes," she said. "I still haven't quite worked out this business of the flames. So far as I know, there's no record of the Hall having been damaged by fire at any time and with all the poking about in *fin-de-siècle* documents that the professor and I did, we'd certainly have spotted a reference to any fire that had occurred around those times."

"The fire wasn't the only anomaly," I added. "The trees were far too tall for 1799. Then there's the statue of the nymph and satyr; it dates from the early nineteenth century but Hester came from behind it."

"Perhaps it's a giant version of the doll and its function was to prevent discovery of the body." Sammie grimaced.

That would explain why the nymph looked so lifeless; she actually represented someone who was dead - Hester to be exact.

"But if it was part of a spell then it didn't work, because the body has been discovered."

Sammie screwed up her face. "Yes, but it took two hundred years, which is not bad for your average warlock. Perhaps the restorers did something that broke the spell. Maybe they damaged the statue or something."

"Or cut down the trees," I said.

"Of course, that's it," Sammie accepted my suggestion with a strange look up at me, as though she was increasingly coming to terms with something very unpleasant. "The spell probably covered the whole garden; that's why I used to feel so weird in there as a kid. George included the young trees in the magic; once they were gone, the secret was revealed."

"And the flames will have something to do with the opening of the gateway to The Void, I expect," I continued. "Do you suppose the statue represents the demon to which Hester was sacrificed?"

Sammie shook her head. "This is all too complicated for me." Then she laughed, "I could always ask Charlotte, of course!"

"Don't even joke about that!" I said.

"Don't worry," she grinned, "But I'm sorry, I just don't know."

I nudged the PC's mouse to de-activate the screen saver and looked again at the picture of Hester Rigg on the screen. There was something familiar about it that had been niggling away at the back of my mind and as soon as my train of thought about the statue had reached a conclusion, the earlier idea forced itself unnervingly into the light. "Do you want to save this and print it out?" I asked Sammie. "I'd like to try something with it."

"Sure," she said. "Be my guest."

Whilst the printer was occupied, I removed the copper coloured ringlets of the Regency hairstyle from the picture and replaced it with a blonde fringe and pony tail. It needed minor modifications of the eyes and mouth, but I knew policemen who would have been happy enough to make an arrest on identification evidence as good as this.

Sammie looked at the face on the screen and pursed her lips tightly. I had thought that Hester looked intelligent, but I had not at first grasped that she was almost the double of another intelligent lady beside me. This was more than just a strong family resemblance. The period hairstyle had been putting me off; just as it had in the oil painting. As Doreen knew, it's amazing what a good disguise a wig can be.

"I'm not sure that I understand this," said Sammie in bemusement. "Why couldn't I see it myself? I've seen that painting dozens of times. Still, it's not that surprising, I suppose; I'm not her descendant, but I come from the same family."

I disagreed. But it was only really sinister, I thought, doing my best to deploy a detective's rationality, if not just one but all the victims looked like Sammie. What we had at the moment was possibly just a remarkable coincidence. We needed to know what Margaret Rigg and Victoria Delabor looked like.

"Did you see a photograph of Victoria during your researches with the professor?" I enquired, doing my best to make it sound a matter of casual interest. I could see that Sammie was not deceived.

"I'll take another look at the stuff in the attic when I'm back there tomorrow." She was still calm; showing her usual self control. "There were photographs there amongst the papers, but we didn't pay them much attention; they weren't what were looking for at the time."

A picture with an obvious resemblance to Sammie, I thought, would not have been left there for her to find. We knew that the papers had been rummaged through and a valuable painting re-touched. However, Victoria had been famous for fifteen minutes in 1899. There would have been photographs taken at the time, not all of which would have been in the possession of the Delabor family.

"If not, don't worry," I said, "we'll find another one. Young Porton, for example, would have kept one even when they broke up. If Victoria was thrown over by the Porton family for the reason I suspect, I doubt very much whether the young man would ever have been able to forget her."

"I don't know what you mean," Sammie began to look a little disconcerted.

"According to the book I was reading," I lied, "witches can bind men to them for life by using love spells."

"Oh," said Sammie reddening a little, "so you're an expert in spells now, are you?"

"Some kinds of spells," I acknowledged honestly. "I have always known about this particular kind."

Whether Sammie suspected anything, I can't say, but she gave me a penetrating look that reminded me strongly of her Aunt Charlotte.

XXIII - 10.15 Monday 20th December

"Behold thou art fair, my beloved, yea pleasant: also our bed is green."

"I told you you'd be back inside a week, but I didn't expect you quite this early, or in quite this much of a mess." Fred was not throwing things around the office, so I felt quite safe; he was intrigued rather than infuriated. "What on earth is this that you've got us into?"

"I haven't got *us* into anything," I explained. "The holiday just became rather more interesting than I'd expected, that's all."

"You've had Doreen assisting you with a burglary!" he said, wagging an accusing finger.

"*Mea culpa*," I admitted.

"Not his fault," Doreen interjected. "I couldn't be kept away. All he asked for was the black bag to be sent up by train." Fred took no notice.

"You've been beaten up by fake policemen, haunted and received messages from the spirit world; on top of that every third person you've met is a witch! And the worst of it is nobody is paying you, for God's sake!" The twinkle in Fred's eyes clearly showed nothing remotely this exciting had befallen Blomberg and Le Tocq in a long time and he wanted to be involved.

Doreen fetched three cups of coffee and stayed without being invited. "A picture of Victoria Delabor won't take long to find, if it exists. I'll get on it right away."

"What about this policewoman?" Fred enquired. "I don't mind our helping with enquiries occasionally; there are times when we need favours from the police in return. But you're actually offering to assist with a crime. You'll need to get immunity, in writing, before you carry anything on the boat. I can do without you being arrested and, much more importantly, I can do without my boat being impounded."

I soothed away his concern. "Fred, we don't even know if the bait had been accepted yet. If and when it is, the Fine Arts and Antiques Squad will get everything properly authorised. Anyway, it's quite encouraging that DS Silver approached me openly about the business; it shows the local nick is giving us a decent reference."

"So I should bloody well hope!" Fred harrumphed, "Chief Superintendent Smythe has cost me enough bottles of good malt over the years."

"How do you propose to avoid both your witches getting involved with your trip to Jersey," Doreen asked. "It'll be bad news if Mrs Kerridge wants to come on a smuggling trip whilst Sammie is hunting Victoria. I can see a new version of the Marie Celeste before you're half way across the Channel."

"So far as I know, Mrs Kerridge has no direct connection with the smuggling. She said she would like to come sometime but it's her husband who runs things and I'm sure he's not fool enough to let her sail on the same vessel as the loot."

"That was a nice touch to give the boat a criminal record," said Fred. "I only hope that Customs manage to expunge it from their files when this business is all over. In my experience bureaucrats seldom manage to get two things right in a row; with our luck, I bet you we'll get some executive grade would-be Tom Keating, who can't bear to undo his own forgery."

"Judging by the way she said hello, Judith Silver has an eye for fine detail," I smiled, remembering the way my very friendly policewoman had endeavoured to deceive my shadow.

"This Anthony character isn't still tailing you, is he?" asked Fred optimistically. "We could give him a lovely run-around here on our own patch."

"No, but he followed me fifty miles down the road yesterday morning," laughed Doreen. "I wore trousers and Toby's sheepskin jacket and put my hair up under a flat cap; the poor sap is too dozy to tell male from female; not exactly a criminal mastermind, our Anthony!"

With luck that meant the Borminster coven didn't know I had been in Cambridge. The fact that "I", in the person of Doreen, had indeed left at the crack of dawn should make the line that I spun Mrs Kerridge sound that bit more convincing.

Doreen smiled wistfully. "She must be quite a looker, this Sammie."

"Yes, well ..." Fred went on to discuss the state of the boat, the weather forecast for the Channel and the stores that would be required. He obviously wished he could go himself.

I left the office and met Sammie from the train. We set out for Poole soon after three. There were the beginnings of a thaw at long last and the MG bowled along the motorway in the last rays of watery sunshine. Not only did the little car sit comfortably at sixty miles per hour, five more than its usual best without boiling, but the heater continued to work perfectly, which was unprecedented.

Sammie had little to tell about her brief trip. Arriving at opening time at her jewellers, she had collected the fake necklace and taken it back to her bedsit to perform the necessary defensive magic. When she had driven up to the Hall in mid-morning, she had found no-one in residence except cousin Anthony, who had been left to mind the store whilst Michael and Nadia went to Castle Donnington to meet an incoming flight bringing other members of the family.

"He smirked in that horrible way of his and asked how I'd managed to lose my latest man so quickly," she related through gritted teeth. "I told him you were a lousy lay and I couldn't be bothered keeping you. That shut him up straight away. You should have seen the look on his face."

"Thanks a lot," I said. "I can see my reputation is safe with you."

"Who gives a damn what Anthony thinks?" Sammie grinned. "I hope he tells all the women in the country, so I can keep you to myself."

She had got rid of Anthony by doing more documentary research. He had always found history boring; she had simply begun work on the papers and ignored him until he went away. As

I expected, there were no pictures of Victoria to be found, but she had made her way to the lumber room, where she found the coffin as she had left it and returned the skull along with the fake necklace.

Before going to the station to meet Sammie, I had collected a well stuffed foolscap envelope from an amused Doreen who assured me that I owed her triple time for all the overtime. This envelope was now in my briefcase on the bench behind the two bucket seats. Doreen had told me that in addition to rendering the documents at A4 size she had blown up and computer enhanced a few small photographs from some of them. I had no time to glance at the prints to discover the cause of her amusement.

I reckoned that there should be time before the voyage to study the printouts. Although it was seldom practicable to use the self-steering for long in the congested waters of the Channel, I had no intention of leaving harbour in the dark and daylight would be almost gone by the time that we arrived in Poole. Sammie would have been all for opening up the package and studying the contents as we drove, but I had concealed the envelope in anticipation of just such a request; if the documents contained evidence of a threat to her I wanted to see them first.

There was a slight drizzle falling when we arrived in Poole and by the time that I had inflated the dinghy and transferred our small quantity of baggage into it, we were already in that clammy state which makes you wonder whether a night afloat is all that romantic after all.

"Is there any heating on this boat?" asked Sammie hopefully.

"Heating and cooking facilities," I replied. "All mod cons really, although she isn't very big."

"Big enough to cross the Channel, I hope," said Sammie.

"Hasn't sunk on the voyage so far," I smiled.

Sammie aimed a playful cuff at my ear and we climbed into the dinghy and shoved off across the marina to the Sea Witch's mooring. There were not many yachts still in the water; most of the owners were summer sailors and hauled their boats up on land for bottom de-fouling and painting during the winter.

Fred liked to sail all year round and the Sea Witch came out of the water for servicing at any time of year that happened to be convenient. The Coastguard hate amateur sailors like this; they have enough trouble with those who get themselves into difficulty during calm weather and long daylight hours in the summer. Fred however knew what he was about and over the years since our first meeting he had taught me most of what he knew, so that neither he nor I had qualms about taking a small boat to sea in the winter.

Sammie made a pretty good job of clambering aboard as I held the dinghy alongside and I followed after handing her up the bags and provisions. The generator started on the second pull as it always did and with the companion hatch closed after us we soon had the little cabin both warm and illuminated. There was enough electric power to start the bilge pump at the same time.

"Show me how to work the stove," Sammie volunteered, "and I'll fix supper while you get everything stowed away, or whatever it is you sailors have to do. I have to make good sometime on my claim that I can cook."

She was soon busily absorbed in preparing a meal and I had the opportunity to look quickly through the contents of Doreen's package. I soon came upon the enlargement which had seemed to amuse her and it was not difficult to see why. In the dim light when I had first seen the pictures it had been completely impossible to make out anything beyond the merest outline. The first of them now enlarged to A4 size almost took my breath away. My shock had clearly registered on my face, for Sammie stood looking at me with a concerned expression.

"What's eating you?" she asked with a smile. "Seen another ghost?"

"I'm not sure," I replied non-committally. "These are the photographs I took during my nocturnal visit to the Hall."

She left the galley stove and came over.

"Doreen must have thought I was developing a taste for pornography," I said. Sammie peered over my shoulder to see. The photograph was of a woman I did not know. It was a professionally produced glamour photograph, almost certainly taken at home rather than in a studio, but with careful attention to lighting and a provocative pose that suggested the blonde on the couch had experience of photographic modeling. She looked to be in her twenties, but the hairstyle was dated; I guessed the picture might have been taken in the mid-seventies.

"Now who is this and what is her picture doing in Michael's files?" I wondered.

Sammie's face registered surprise; yet it was not the pose that shocked her. "I've not seen that one before," she said. "I'm not sure, because it's a long time ago, but it looks like Elaine, Michael's first wife, Anthony's mother. She died soon after Anthony was born, but I remember seeing pictures of her in our family album. Needless to say, none of the pictures were quite like this. This looks like something out of the pages of a top-shelf magazine, doesn't it?"

"But why would Michael have a picture like this in the first place and why would he keep it? I can't imagine him attributing sentimental value to a nude photograph of his ex-wife, especially after re-marrying. And it would cause a terrible scandal if it fell into the wrong hands ... like mine, for instance."

She closed her eyes as if in deep concentration. "I don't know; I get just a sense of the photograph itself having been used in a spell before they were married," she said. "It's hard to tell because it's many years old and this isn't the original; maybe she used it in a spell to entice him; I don't know."

"Whoever took this was no novice photographer," I said."

"The only member of the family who's a really good photographer is Orson," she said thoughtfully. "Loath though I might be to admit that my uncle-by-marriage has any good qualities, I have to confess that he does have a genuine talent in that respect. He has a whole cupboard full of expensive cameras and lenses; he's even had work published."

"If we hadn't been otherwise preoccupied," she grinned, "you might have noticed several of his photographs up around the walls in our bedroom at their house. But he didn't know Elaine before her marriage to Michael, so far as I'm aware. She was French, did you know? Or to be more exact, I think she was a Breton; almost from your part of the world really."

"Give or take a fairly significant stretch of water," I remarked. Then, "When you say she might have used it to entice him," I ventured, "what do you mean exactly?"

Sammie didn't bat an eyelid. "There are various spells for catching a man," she said. "One of them involves sending the man a photograph of yourself, after you've recited a binding incantation over it. One look and the photograph and he is yours for life, in theory."

"One look at a photograph like this and I could well believe it," I replied. "I don't know that she would have needed to bother with the spell though. Now why have you never sent me a photograph like this?"

"I rather thought I'd try the direct approach," she smiled. "As I recall I presented you with the real thing!" She put her arm around my neck and sat in my lap, giving me a little peck on the cheek as she did so.

Despite the distraction my train of thought ran on. Why would a Breton girl have picked upon Michael, I wondered? And how on earth did a warlock manage to identify one foreign witch to marry, much less two, one after the other? I supposed that witchcraft must be a fairly small world and Michael had been quite a traveller in his youth; whiz-kid international banker and all that stuff.

"Can you remember how Elaine met her death?" I asked.

"I'm not really sure," Sammie replied. "Remember I was little more than a baby at the time. I vaguely recall some story about a car crash; one of the family album snaps showed Elaine with an E-Type Jaguar. I believe she was a very fast lady." Then she changed the subject as though she were bored with discussing a woman dead for almost twenty years, or maybe irritated that I was showing so much interest in a nude photograph of someone else.

"What else do you have amongst your nefariously acquired photographs?"

I flipped though the file on Sammie herself. There was the sort of scrap book material that a normal family might have, such as school records and examination successes. There was one document however which looked very unusual. As I examined it, a cold fear started to grip me, like an icy belt around my waist. It was a tabular check list; there was a column of very small print accompanied by three complete columns of ticks and a fourth column which was incomplete and had Sammie's name at the head of it; the first three columns being headed Margaret, Hester and Victoria. Sammie saw the expression on my face and quickly took in the contents of the sheet of paper.

"Well," she said slowly, "if there were any doubts about who is the intended victim come the Millennium, there can't be now, can there? I seem to have measured up to most of the criteria established by my predecessors. What do I have left to do?" She seemed remarkably cool as her eyes flicked down the page. There were only three gaps in the column of ticks.

"We could put another tick in for them really couldn't we?" she said after a moment. "I wonder how they were proposing to establish whether I was actually sleeping with you or not?"

The completed lines in the column of ticks related to such things as age, relationship to family head and the possession of magical powers. One of the three empty rows related to a physical liaison with a non-witch; Margaret and her Colonel Wainfleet; Victoria and young Porton probably. I wondered who had been allowed to seduce Hester before her murder.

The two remaining rows were difficult to understand. One specified that the victim should go willingly to Baal. I thought of my vision of Hester; she had seemed willing enough. Did it matter if the willingness was somehow artificially induced? And as for Baal, well there was no further possibility of avoiding the issue. If Sammie genuinely did not know about passing through the fire, I should have to explain it to her; if she had been holding back her knowledge to protect me I should have to tread carefully around the issue of how I came to know what I knew.

"I remember Bible stories of Hebrew prophets denouncing the worship of Baal," I said. "Do witches revere Baal too?"

"It does look like it," Sammie nodded. "I've never heard the name before in this context. I'm like you - I just remember it from school."

I took a deep breath. Was the responsibility on me to explain?

The last row indicated that the victim's blood must be spilled at the stroke of midnight on the centennial eve. In each of the completed columns there followed the letters "C M B". In the column under Sammie's name there appeared in brackets the letters "C S". I was tempted to read into these two sets of initials the Latin for the keys of Mary Bullivant and Solomon respectively.

"What's this C S?" I asked.

"Completely stupid, I expect," Sammie retorted. If she knew about the *Clavicula Solomonis*, she obviously wasn't going to reveal the fact. "I don't know. There are magic words that it isn't considered safe to write down. Maybe there's a clue somewhere else in the papers; we'll have to go through them all carefully after dinner. Speaking of which …" She jumped up and hastened to the galley stove, from which a smell of burning was emanating.

She was strangely relaxed about this black magic. If someone had been threatening me with ritual murder, I'm pretty sure that I would have taken an avid interest in any relevant information; Sammie however was more fussed about the damage to her culinary reputation and was busily trying to cut away singed portions of the food. I looked quickly through the remaining photographs; the ikon from the safe had come out quite well; I made a note to fax a copy to Judith Silver at an early opportunity.

At last I came upon what I was really looking for; the handwritten pages of the old book from the mantelpiece of the fireplace in the witching room. At first I was disappointed; it did not appear to be Lord George's witchcraft diary. In fact the effeminate handwriting was surely not that of Lord George at all; it was neat and delicate, not what one would expect of a hunter and military man. The first page appeared to contain a spell to protect the book itself against unauthorised access. It was written in Latin.

"Who looks upon this page be assured, none may read this book but she who writes and he who holds the key." I translated. *"If another opens this book let him find no words."* The translation was less difficult than I expected. I had not enjoyed Latin at school.

A few days ago I would have laughed at this spell. Although now my ideas had changed, it seemed that if a defensive spell had been arranged to protect the contents of the book it wasn't working; I had no trouble reading it. I turned to the next photograph.

"*Victoria Delabor*," I read, "*her book.*" I lost all sense of disappointment that the book was not Lord George's. Did we have here an actual testimony from the most recent victim, the one whose trail we were following to Jersey? "*Being an account of the relationship*," Victoria's words went on, "*between her family and the demon Baal, who guards the Great Grimoire of Solomon.*" It seemed I had found something even better than Lord George's book of spells; an inside explanation of the Rigg family curse.

"Well, grub's up, such as it is. I'm sorry it's rather a burnt offering." Sammie broke in upon my train of thought at the least opportune moment imaginable, but after her heroic efforts to salvage the meal I couldn't possibly tell her that the food had to wait. I still had not told her of the book's existence, so there was no way to say that I needed to study its contents. She took hold of my hand and turned the photograph towards her.

"What’s that?" she enquired. "Has the photograph not come out? How did you manage to over expose it in the dark?"

For a moment I did not understand what she was saying. I gave her the photograph and she took it over to the light.

"There’s the edge of a sheet of paper here," she said, "but either the paper’s blank or the flash has reflected off the surface. Was it different paper from the other files?"

To say that I was astonished would be understating my reaction. Sammie could not see the words on the page; what I could see clearly was invisible to her, witch blood notwithstanding. I almost told her about it there and then, but just as I was about to explain she handed the photograph back to me

"You can study the rest of the printouts after dinner," she insisted. "I’m not about to have you eat a meal that’s both burnt and cold."

Considering it was Sammie’s first attempt with a strange stove in a cramped environment, I doubted if Egon Ronay could have been too critical, even though the meal was washed down with diluted fruit juice rather than Charlotte's Mouton Rothschild. We squeezed in either side of the small cabin table and I dumped the printouts on the seat beside me. The hot food was welcome after the drive down and whilst we ate Sammie chattered about what we should do after the New Year, seemingly quite confident that we had all the time in the world together. I tried hard to pay attention and respond, though more than half my mind was still working on the mystery of the 'now you see it, now she doesn’t' writing.

In the end I decided that the best thing was for me to read what I could and find out if there was anything relevant to Sammie. There was no need to alarm her unnecessarily with what appeared to be a spell that did not threaten her. As long as one of us could read the book it was enough. To cover myself, when we had finished eating, I fished out the photograph of the doll and flipped it across the table to her.

She studied it carefully, holding the photograph a foot from her face in the wan light from the fluorescent strip on the deckhead. "Taking this together with the check list," she said calmly, "we can assume this is me. But the fact that we know what they're trying to do gives us a big advantage; none of my predecessors would have had the assistance of a cat-burglar, I expect. None of them will have seen their equivalent of this doll and none of them is likely to have known about the necklace either. I've already fixed the necklace as well as I can; this photograph should give me enough of a lever on the doll to neutralise its power too. I'll need to be left in private for a little while, if you don't mind; I can't concentrate with you watching me, you're too distracting!"

"That's all right," I said. "I'll take the rest of these and go and sit up in the cockpit. Give me a shout when you're through."

I wrapped myself up warmly in my foul weather gear and went out to sit beside the compass light next to the helm. The poor light was the only problem that I had in reading the remaining pages of the book. The illumination was just strong enough for me to read what Victoria had written, but it was soon apparent that I had had to stop my photography too soon, when Doreen had warned me of the fire on the roof. There was surprisingly little there of any sense Victoria might have had of her own peril. What was there was a piece of Arabian Nights fantasy.

Victoria wrote about how the Wisdom of Solomon had so impressed the Queen of Sheba that she had given him a magical book, a grimoire, which had been treasured in her country for countless generations. So long had it been guarded by the Ethiopian priesthood that none survived who could even read it, let alone practise the magic which it contained.

Solomon had already made great studies in the art of sorcery and he was able in due time to decipher the content of the book. He soon realised that it gave him the power to enslave the demon Baal. Not only did the demon give Solomon the power to achieve glory and riches, the favours of the Queen and suzerainty over neighbouring countries; he placed at the disposal of the great king the power to rule the world.

In his wisdom, Solomon declined this temptation, for he realised that to accept would be to make himself dependent upon Baal and to allow his slave to enslave him in his turn. He also recognised that not all his posterity could be trusted to handle the grimoire and its demon with sensible restraint. Baal however could be confined to The Void along with the grimoire and barred from using any gateways unless properly called by The Chosen of Solomon.

It was not long, Victoria wrote, before experimentation with sacrifices began. The sacrifice was believed to be an exchange for the powers the demon could confer on the one who summoned him. It was not at first understood that gateways depended upon measured centuries. This mistake led many to offer sacrifices at other times, when Baal, being imprisoned in The Void, was powerless to respond. The duel between the prophets of Baal and Elijah was one such occasion, though the deaths of the false prophets suggested confusion between the demands of Baal and the demands of Jehovah. In fact much of the Old Testament betrayed the same confusion, regarding the deaths of Israel's enemies as somehow pleasing to God.

Two millennial gateways had passed with no-one able, or perhaps no-one willing, to offer what was necessary in exchange for the Great Grimoire, but at the time of the crusades, the great sorcerer Saladin, leader of the Moslem defenders of Palestine, had been successful enough in tapping Baal's powers to make his armies invincible. It appeared however that Saladin had been injured in a fall from his horse whilst riding alone to spy upon the Christian armies besieging Acre. Lying unconscious and near death from concussion and heat-stroke, his body had been chanced upon by an English knight.

Sir Ranulf Bullivant's surprisingly chivalrous reaction to his enemy's plight was not to finish him off and rob the corpse, but to tend the sorcerer's injuries and restore him to health. Declaring that he would take unfair advantage of no man, not even a heathen, Ranulf then proposed to set Saladin at liberty without demanding any ransom. So moved was the sorcerer by this generosity, he declared that were there only more Christians of this ilk there would be no war between their two peoples. In return for saving his life, he instructed Ranulf in the service of Baal, giving him a sacred relic to use in the summoning.

The knight himself had regarded the story as an amusing pagan superstition and he told no-one of the episode until he returned home. When Ranulf finally related the tale to his wife, he chose the wrong person; Morgan Bullivant was of witch blood and had cast a spell to ensure that her husband returned from the crusades with great riches. At first she thought the spell had failed, but when she heard the story of Saladin, she knew that her husband had indeed returned with more wealth than he could have carried on twenty pack horses.

For generations the Bullivant family prospered, passing down the secret through their daughters, until it happened that one sought knowledge, not wealth, as her part of the bargain. The family subsided again into obscurity. Mary Bullivant was the last of her line. She had great powers, but chose to apply them to healing rather than to self-enrichment. She was widely known to be one of the 'cunning folk' or white witches. Before the Reformation such people were largely tolerated by the Church; after it both Catholics and Protestants became paranoid. The collapse of the old certainties of religion proved that the Devil was abroad in the world and his agents had to be hunted down and destroyed.

Sir Giles Rigg had belonged to a family whose powers were less than Mary's. He had turned the witchfinders against Mary to deflect them from himself, but he had received from the old crone more than he had bargained for. Sir Giles used the knowledge to enrich himself and his family, but he depraved and corrupted them in the process, with the consequences that they eventually became practitioners of human sacrifice and, at that, of their own flesh and blood. Sir Giles himself had tried to summon Baal the very night Mary was burned, using the inherited treasure which the old woman had stored in her little cottage and never sought to use.

Subsequently it was believed by the Riggs and Delabors that their family was chosen, but the secret of the summoning ritual had somehow been lost. Perhaps in her death throes Mary had failed to complete her message. Because of Mary's death, the death of a female descendant and the sacrifice of her fortune were believed to be the price that Sir Giles had agreed in exchange for a century of wealth.

Victoria suspected that business astuteness was a much more likely explanation, but that Margaret's death had entrenched the superstition. Hester Rigg's own jewels had been used to summon the demon a century later; she had been an avid disciple of Baal and willingly volunteered herself for sacrifice, believing that her spirit would be translated to The Void, in which she would exercise limitless power. It sounded as though the madness in the family was not limited to Lord George's wife.

Victoria recorded that she had all this from her mother, who had it from hers, handed down from generation to generation in an oral tradition. No previous ancestress had dared to write this down, but she was writing it in order to expose the horror and bring it to an end; the book was intended for "He who holds The Keys."

The last page that I had photographed ended in mid sentence, without any account of how Victoria had hoped to evade a similar fate. The checklist implied that she had died soon afterwards.

I had been absorbed in my reading for some time, struggling to make out the fuzzy copies in the poor light. I had not noticed the change in the weather, or the boat's motion. Now as I came to the end of Victoria's story, I looked out from under the tarpaulin sheeting which, whilst in harbour, was rigged like a tent over the cockpit from the mainsail boom. The drizzle had turned to a thick fog. I could not make out so much as a glow from the harbour lights, let alone anything of the shoreline.

Sea Witch was not riding at the angle to the tide that she should have been, held as she was by her bow mooring, but instead was wallowing broadside on to waves that were bigger than anything I had seen before in Poole harbour, or any other harbour come to that. I stashed the photographs in the waterproof compartment under the helmsman's seat and went forward to check the moorings. A large greater black-backed gull was sitting on the forecastle looking at me with malevolent unconcern. As I approached it rose into the air with an irritated squawk, soared briefly and then came to rest again on the cockpit canopy. Concealed behind where the gull had originally been perched was the remains of the mooring buoy cable. It did not even reach as far as its eyelet in the bows and appeared to have been cut through deliberately.

Sea Witch was adrift.

XXIV - 22:30 Monday 20th December

"I sought him whom my soul loveth, I sought him, but I found him not."

The ebb tide was running strongly, but I couldn't understand how we could have drifted right out of the harbour without running aground or bumping into anything. Poole's natural harbour is an almost entirely landlocked bay and leaving it involves a circuitous route around Brownsea Island and a sharp turn to port to take the narrow channel out into Poole Bay, with Bournemouth to your north and Studland to your south. A boat dragging its anchor could normally expect to end up on the north shore of the Isle of Purbeck, or aground on one of the numerous small islets which fringe it. What one would not expect would be to find oneself out in the English Channel; not at any rate without some assistance. Nevertheless, out of harbour we appeared to be. The whys and wherefores could come later. The first thing to do was stabilise the boat in relation to the direction of the seas.

We were certainly not in sheltered waters. Some of the rollers already looked threatening and I couldn't make sail before getting down the tarpaulin cover from the main boom. I worked my way back to the cockpit, dislodging the irate gull again in the process and broke out the sea anchor. Securing the cable to the eyelet beside the wheel, I heaved the heavy canvas anchor over the stern. Within seconds the cable tightened and Sea Witch came round bows on to the sea. I wondered whether to disturb Sammie, but I decided that now that the motion was easier, I could get the canopy down on my own. Her business was a matter of life and death and mine, I sincerely hoped, was now more or less under control, though since I didn't know where we were, there was always the danger of running on to rocks or into shipping lanes.

I got down the canopy and stowed it away more or less tidily into the small hold space. So far I reckoned I was doing pretty well for a part-time sailor in an unexpected emergency. The fog still shrouded the boat; I could not get a star sight to fix our position and Fred, being old fashioned about these things, had never fitted electronic direction finding. Nelson, he contended, had not needed satellites and neither did he. I would need to disturb Sammie to get to the radio and notify the coastguard; that could wait a few minutes. We could not have been adrift for more than an hour; at worst we could only be a mile or two out in the bay. Then again maybe it would be even worse if we were about to run ashore on Bournemouth beach and become a laughing stock with the daylight if the tide didn't float us off first.

Should I start the engine or make sail? Fred had said the diesel tank was not full. I had meant to obtain fuel from the jetty before sailing in the morning. I decided that the engine had better to be reserved for more serious problems. Like what? Well, like manoeuvring out of the way of a super-tanker that hasn't seen you when there's not enough wind to give you steerage. Fred and I had encountered just such an emergency eighteen months ago and the sharp cliff that was the tanker's bows was etched indelibly in my memory, though fortunately not in Sea Witch's side.

Working away as calmly as I could in the circumstances, I stripped off the sail coverings and ran up the jib, leaving it flapping in what was no more than a stiff breeze. Then, deciding to err on the side of caution, I put three reefs in the main. Before I hoisted it, I thought I would have to let Sammie know what was going on.

The self steering gear was not rigged and once I had way on the boat I would not be able to leave the wheel. I could sail the boat single handed easily enough, but it would help if my companion at least knew that I had to do so.

The binnacle compass indicated that our bows were pointed south east. That would do for now. At least if we landed on Bournemouth Promenade we would do so stern first. There was no answer to my knock on the cabin door; I wondered if Sammie was still wrapped in concentration on her spell, or had perhaps fallen asleep. I had taken to heart her warning about not pulling out of a spell half way through and I did not want to startle her.

The sound of a foghorn made up my mind for me. I did not know how far away the vessel was, but it was a good deal larger than Sea Witch and I didn't even have riding lights illuminated as yet. I knocked again and entered the cabin when there was no reply. The cabin was deserted. It was not big enough to take more than a few seconds to search. The stores locker under the forecastle was barely large enough to conceal anyone, but it was unoccupied too. The photographs that I had left with Sammie were still lying on the cabin table. Our half unpacked bags lay on the bunks that doubled as bench seats. I was sure that Sammie had not come up on deck whilst I was making sail, but if she was not on deck then she was no longer aboard.

The foghorn sounded again, still muffled, but definitely nearer. I hurried back to the cockpit, turned off the cabin lights and turned on the riding lights, which could last for many hours on battery power. There was no sign of Sammie on deck. My only passenger was the black backed gull, which now occupied a position near the mast, seemingly undisturbed by the flapping jib.

I realised that in my haste to get out the sea anchor I had not checked what had become of the dinghy; it was certainly not towing astern. I soon realised that it was gone. The painter had not parted or been cut and I was confident that my mooring knot would not have come loose without human assistance. It made little or no sense to me that Sammie would do this; in any case how could she have come up to the cockpit, gone forward and cut the mooring cable and then returned to the cockpit and cast off the dinghy, all without my noticing as I sat there reading? And why? She had invited herself on the voyage and had been enthusiastic about it.

But if Sammie had not cut the cable then who had? Where was she? How had all of this been achieved without making any noise at all? I shivered inside my foul weather gear, though I wasn't cold. The fog was so dense that I could see no more than a few yards beyond Sea Witch's bowsprit. The Marie Celeste had Doreen said? I didn't know whether I had lost Sammie overboard or she had set me adrift in The Channel. Should I call the coastguard? I could imagine the result of telling them that my passenger was a witch and I hadn't a clue how she had disappeared.

The foghorn sounded again. In the enveloping damp shroud it sounded closer, but the direction was hard to make out. The black backed gull decided it wasn't too happy with this ferry boat after all and rose into the air with another squawk. Within seconds it was lost to view in the fog. I was alone and lost in the open sea and far too close to a shipping lane. I took a deep breath, despite the foggy air, to settle my nerves.

"Hey, captain, art thou sleeping down below, or up aloft, or wherever the hell thou art? Why did you turn out the lights? A girl could get lost and fall overboard you know!" Sammie's head poked out from the newly opened cabin door. A huge sense of relief washed over me. I didn't know what was going on, but at least she was safe.

"Where were you?" I gasped. "I thought I'd lost you! I was just down in the cabin!"

The foghorn sounded again. Very close now and I could distinctly hear the throb of large engines above the noise of the wind and the sea. Questions would have to wait.

"There's a ship coming. We have to get steerage way on her. Sheet home the jib," I said to Sammie. "Turn that windlass there. Press the unlocking key first ... that's it." Sammie did as she was asked like a veteran yachtswoman. I was already raising the reefed mainsail. Within seconds the Sea Witch heeled to the breeze and gathered way on the starboard tack. The sea anchor was now an encumbrance. I got Sammie to hold the wheel steady whilst I brought it back aboard and draped it over the taffrail to drain. The foghorn sounded right on top of us and the note of the engines was loud. I could still see nothing.

"Right now," I said to Sammie, "we could use a little protective magic to ensure that either that ship has an alert radar watch or else that she's going dead slow."

"I'm afraid you'll have to produce the magic yourself," Sammie replied nervously. "I've already had to use up everything I had tonight. I'll explain later."

"Let's hope there is a later," I said. Sammie gripped the cabin rail tightly and shut her eyes. The next minute was as tense as any I remember. When the freighter came out of the murk yards from our port bow, it was like a re-run of the incident of eighteen months before. The freighter was indeed going dead slow, but a big ship that close to you is unnerving at the best of times. This was not the best of times. She was heading straight for us. Sammie opened her eyes and screamed.

"Hang on tight!" I shouted. "We're crossing her bows. She'll miss us. Just hang on tight to the rail!"

I sounded more courageous than I felt. I knew I must not lose my nerve. There was no room to manoeuvre. With all my strength I held Sea Witch on course and willed her through the danger. Sea Witch was making five or six knots. The elapsed time must have been no more than a couple of seconds, but for me time seemed almost to stop. The blunt bows loomed over us like a cliff and the heavy engines echoed menacingly in the fog. I concentrated my mind on the clear water beyond her bows, picturing the freighter falling away astern as we sailed on by. Somehow the fear fell away from me too. I knew we were going to make it. At that moment we crossed the freighter's bows with five yards to spare. Sea Witch bounced awkwardly off the freighter's bow wave and threatened to yaw into the suction caused by the leviathan's passage, but I was able to catch the yacht on the wheel and lay her back on course. The freighter passed on its way unknowing, as though nothing had happened.

"God, that was frightening," said Sammie. "Captain, thou art not bad in the magic department thyself." Her face was ashen. She placed a hand over mine on the wheel and put her arm around me.

I smiled, the tension draining out of me like the water from the sea anchor running round my feet. "Thank you," I said, "though how we came to be here, wherever we are, I'm not sure. That wasn't a ferry. Somehow we've lost our moorings and drifted into a main shipping lane. Let's hope most of the world's merchant fleet has closed down for Christmas just like Orson said."

"She found one," Sammie said in a sombre voice, raising her head. "She'll find another."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Who found one?" It sounded as if she was suggesting that the ship would have run us down on purpose.

"Charlotte of course," said Sammie. "She was here. She set us adrift."

"Nonsense, Sammie," I said, as kindly as I could in my current state. "I was here in the cockpit the whole time. No-one could have got aboard without my seeing them."

"Charlotte did," Sammie replied. "And you did see her, but only after she'd finished her work."

In response to my firm denial that I had seen anyone, Sammie assured me that I had seen Charlotte, but not recognised her. "You made her leave her seat in the bows. She gave you a considerable piece of her mind in the process. Evidently she was pretty offended to find the two of us together, though I can't understand why. She seemed to have accepted it the last time we saw her."

I could think of a reason why Charlotte would have been annoyed to find me with Sammie, but I had no desire to explain it and in any case I could hardly credit what Sammie was suggesting.

"The only thing I disturbed on the bows," I replied with profound scepticism, "was a greater black backed gull."

"Charlotte's good at birds," said Sammie calmly. "Black backs have pretty sharp beaks for chiselling through mooring cables too."

I opened my mouth to protest and shut it again. There was no point in telling Sammie that I didn't believe Charlotte had been aboard in the shape of a gull. Her voice carried conviction and I had myself half entertained the notion that the lady had the power to change herself into a cat. Somehow a bird seemed even more ludicrous.

"And I suppose this gull also untied the painter of the dinghy?" I said, not entirely successful in keeping the note of sarcasm out of my voice.

"No, I did that," said Sammie patiently and in response to my incredulous expression, she explained that, whilst I had been up in the bows, she had come up and hidden under the cockpit canopy. She had been afraid that Charlotte might try to knock me into the sea whilst my attention was concentrated on the severed cable and she had therefore decided on a diversionary tactic.

"I didn't fancy being left alone on this boat," Sammie said, "and even more than that I didn't fancy you being drowned. I thought if she saw the dinghy floating away she'd realise we were in this together. She needs me alive after all; or at least I thought she did until I saw that ship come out of the fog."

I could hardly object that Sammie should not have cast off the dinghy, since she appeared to have been trying to protect me from what she believed to have been a threat to my life, but I protested that the incident with the freighter had been just a straightforward accident. "That was a perfectly ordinary maritime near miss in thick fog," I said firmly. "It happens all the time; it's the second time it's happened to me. But how on earth do you know what was taking place on deck whilst you were in the cabin? And where were you when I went down below to look for you?"

"And thanks very much, Sammie, for risking your life to save me!" she pouted. "Well it so happens that when you're concentrating on a spell, you become intensely aware of any other witch in your vicinity. You have to be; it takes a while to readjust to the physical plane and you'd be very vulnerable if another witch could catch you unawares. You can more or less see all your surroundings as though you were high up, looking down on your own body, or the place where your body is.

"I saw Charlotte arrive, but I was already too tired to cope. I'd used up a lot of energy working a spell on the photograph of the doll. It was all I could do to throw a defensive screen round myself; I couldn't include you in it too. I just didn't have the strength. That was why I was afraid for you. I couldn't have warned you without tipping off Charlotte to where I was."

She was actually apologising for not being able to protect me, though I had not felt myself in any danger. I hugged her close to me and she whispered into my coat. "When I was fully conscious again, I had to wait for you to notice Charlotte's presence, but you were studying the photographs for ages and all the time Charlotte was sitting on the bows controlling the boat's drift. When you finally disturbed her, I cast off the dinghy to try and distract her from you and she very nearly landed on top of my head when she perched on the canopy. I was frightened, I'm sorry; I went down to the cabin and hid in the clothes locker."

"You did what?" I gasped.

"I know, silly isn't it?" Sammie looked a little shamefaced. "The sort of thing I used to do when I was a kid. But I had nothing left that I could do, except make it difficult for her to find me. She was hoping that I'd come on deck, I think. Gulls aren't too good in confined spaces and she could hardly change shape with you looking at her."

It was a little hard to credit that one could hold, outside one of Britain's few remaining asylums, a rational conversation about what a witch who had changed herself into a gull could or could not do. Since the past few days had provided me with quite a sufficiency of the incredible which admitted no alternative explanation than that it was the truth, I found it easier to accept Sammie's statement than you might suppose. I changed the subject.

"I don't know our position," I said. "I should really call the coastguard, but if they have to come out to us, there'll be hell to pay and we shan't make it to Jersey in a month of Sundays."

I could not tell Sammie the main reason for my reluctance. Since the customs records now showed Sea Witch was suspected of being used in smuggling there might be some very embarrassing explaining to do.

"Well why call them?" asked Sammie. "We're not damaged. Can't we just heave to, or whatever the expression is, until daylight? You'll be able to fix our position with a sight of land, won't you?"

"We're in a shipping lane and I don't know how much diesel we have," I replied. "If the wind drops and we run out of juice we'll be sitting ducks."

"That'll make three of us doing our bird impressions!" Sammie's musical laugh cut through the tension. "Come on, do some dead reckoning. Or can't you use that whilst we're still alive? You know there's never a deceased relative around when you need one!" Her self control was back and her puns were worse than mine. I could not help but laugh with her.

"The Channel," I pointed out, trying to be serious, "is a bad place to be even a little bit mistaken; apart from ships there are some pretty nasty obstructions. It's about fifteen nautical miles from Poole Bay to The Needles for example; not a place I'd care to be on a lee shore on a foggy night!"

Sammie was undaunted. "I can tell you where Charlotte steered us. We passed close by a ferry terminal to port; just a small ferry it was." I knew that had to be the harbour mouth, just before we passed out into the bay, but I could still hardly credit that Sammie had made detailed observations on a foggy night whilst below decks. "After that I was normally conscious again, so I couldn't see, but it was about twenty minutes before you noticed," she concluded.

With a three knot tide and a light following breeze, that would have put us no more than a couple of miles off Bournemouth. Either my dead reckoning was wrong or that freighter had been very lost indeed. I shook my head. Sammie looked irritated at the implication that her information was doubted.

"We would surely hear surf if we were close to anything dangerous," she said. "I say let's just sit tight and wait for morning. I'll sit up here with you." She snuggled up close to me as I sat by the wheel.

I tell you, I have had less attractive propositions. I did not want to run before the wind at five knots throughout the night. Even without hitting anything, we could cross the Channel during the remaining hours of darkness and find ourselves in trouble on the coast of France. I could heave to, or I could beat up and down and try and remain more or less in the same place overnight, wherever that was. We had no echo sounder and I doubted if we were in shallow enough water to drop anchor.

"Have it your way," I said, "we'll heave to, but we'll have to stay awake all night. If we fall asleep we could wake up dead." I set about snugging the boat down.

"I'll think of something to keep your mind active," said Sammie. And then, just as I thought she meant something else, she giggled, "How about a coffee for starters?"

The night was not too cold, the wind did not get up and Sammie pressed close against me and talked and talked. What she remembered of her parents; how Charlotte had forced her into the sort of witchcraft that her mother had eschewed; and so on.

"I was wondering, can you remember discovering you had powers, Sammie, or is it something that's always been with you? I'm thinking perhaps the way ordinary people don't consciously have to think about eyesight for example."

"Oh, I'm afraid I remember it well. It's almost a pre-verbal memory; I must have been only a toddler. I was in the garden at home and the neighbours' dog jumped over the fence and started barking at me. I was very scared, but also very angry because the dog was in my garden where he had no right to be. So I just pointed at him and told him that he should drop down dead for giving me such a fright."

"Let me guess," I said, "he did just that?"

"I'm afraid he did," she said, with some sadness. "My father had to go round and apologise. He made up some story about the dog having eaten some poison that he'd put down for rats. My mother took me up to my room, sat me on my bed and very calmly explained to me that I was not like other little girls and that I must never wish for anything that I didn't really and truly want, because it might come true. I was so shocked by the dog dying that I've never forgotten her words."

"You mean you never tried to get your own back on the school bully for example?" I asked.

Sammie laughed. "I said I never forgot, not that I never wished anything. Anyway," she squirmed around to face me, "how do you know that I wasn't the school bully?"

"You couldn't have been," I smiled. "It's not in you to be vindictive."

Sammie seemed genuinely pleased. "I'm glad you think so. We'll do a deal, though. I won't ask you about other women before we met and you won't ask me about magic that doesn't concern you."

"Fair enough."

"But," she went on, "we have a small problem or two to sort out first, don't we?" That was the first time she had referred to the approaching Millennium since she had come on deck. I decided that I had better come clean myself.

"What I was studying in the printouts," I began, "was about two thirds of a handwritten book that I found in the Hall. It was written by Victoria Delabor. It's all about how your family came to be associated with a demon called Baal and gateways that involved human sacrifice."

Sammie's discomfiture was only momentary. Quickly recovering her composure she declared cheerfully that it sounded as though she should read what the lady had written. "I don't know how come you're so good at getting information out of my ancestors;" she continued, "first the ghost at Borminster and now Victoria. I've been around twenty years without hearing from either of them and I'm supposed to be a historian as well as a witch."

"Beginner’s luck," I said. I warned her that the book didn't make happy reading. "It seems as though this Baal is a fairly unpleasant piece of work," I concluded.

"I never heard of a nice demon, did you?" said Sammie, logically enough. "Where did you put the printouts?"

"I'm sitting on them," I replied. "Hold the wheel a minute and I'll get them. But I think you might have a problem reading them."

"If you could read them, why can’t I?" she enquired reasonably enough. "I hope you’re not suggesting that I need glasses like Charlotte, or something."

I took a deep breath. "‘*Or something*’ might just cover it," I said.

"Now what?" she gave me a funny look.

"I’ve already shown you a page," I explained. "The photograph that you said was overexposed." She looked at me as I think I must have looked at her when she first admitted to witchcraft.

I gave her the printouts and she moved over beside the binnacle light and became completely silent, in marked contrast to the preceding hour. It was harder to read than when the light had been reflected from the underside of the white canopy, but I didn’t think that was what she was finding frustrating.

"There’s nothing here that I can see, she said finally. "Can you put the cabin lights back on for a while and let me get a better look at them?"

I did as she asked and she disappeared below. The fog was as thick as ever and the rigging dripped with moisture, shaking loose a little shower of droplets with every flap of the sails. Hove to, Sea Witch had an uncomfortable motion, corkscrewing over the rollers. I seem to have been blessed with a strong stomach and Sammie was evidently the same, or perhaps she had a spell to ward off sea-sickness. She was gone a long time. Once I thought I heard the cry of a gull somewhere off in the dark, but neither my former passenger nor any other bird came into view. Since the foghorn of the freighter had died away in the distance, we had heard no sounds of other shipping and Sammie's foreboding that Charlotte would summon up another vessel to run us down seemed to have been mistaken.

I was thinking about the earlier incident when I had searched below for Sammie and not found her. I had not looked in the clothes locker it was true; I had not expected her to be hiding. But the locker was barely five feet high and less than a foot deep. It would have been the most uncomfortable place for a girl of Sammie's build to conceal herself silently. And why had she not revealed herself when she must have realised that I was looking for her?

I could still not tell how much Sammie was holding back. The information about witchcraft that I had got out of her was mostly in confirmation of things that she realised I already knew. Had she genuinely never heard the name of Baal in this context, or was it that I had not discovered it before that night? I did not understand her reticence. How did she expect me to help if she persistently kept me in the dark? There are times when someone's efforts to protect you can be infuriating. I had agreed to her deal, but I feared that maybe she and I would turn out to have different ideas about what magic did or did not concern me.

By the time that a lightening in the background colour of the fog heralded daybreak, Sammie had still not reappeared on deck and I had caught myself falling asleep at the helm several times. I set Sea Witch on the starboard tack and rigged the self-steering. Then I went below in search of Sammie and some breakfast.

The cabin was empty. The printouts that Sammie had taken below with her lay on the galley table, last page exposed, with the writing on it clearly visible to me. I had a sense of *déjà vu*. This time the first place I looked was the clothes locker. It was, of course, unoccupied.

"I'm in the loo!" came Sammie's voice. "Be right out!" She emerged a few moments later looking not quite bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, but alert enough to pass for it in the half light of dawn. "What did you think, that I'd changed into a kittiwake and headed home overnight?" she jested. "I've told you before I can't do that stuff; I leave it to Charlotte."

She headed for the galley sink and splashed water over her hands and face. "I'm sorry I left you to it overnight. I didn't mean to." She dried her hands and came over to give me a peck on the cheek. "I was trying to figure out why you could read the book and I couldn't. I tried a few simple spells I know for revealing hidden writing but nothing seemed to work and then as I was trying to think what it all meant, I'm afraid I just fell asleep. It seems a long way from the jewellers in Cambridge yesterday morning and it all just sort of caught up with me."

"I thought you'd exhausted your powers before Charlotte came," I complained; a combination, I suppose, of abandoned lover and private detective picking up inconsistent evidence.

"I recover when I rest," she said, without annoyance. "We were talking a long time, you know. Now I've said I'm sorry. Stop moaning and I'll magic up some breakfast." She pointed to the printouts on the table. "Can you still read them this morning?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Well then," she concluded, "Victoria did a nice line in witchcraft, but for some reason she only hid the writing from other witches. And she didn't include a spell to prevent a non-witch from describing the contents to a witch. Now why would anyone work a spell like that?"

"Go figure!" I said. "You're the expert, not me."

Sammie seemed to decide that it wasn't all that important anyway. "I really did intend to sit up with you and help you keep awake," she said. "Will you forgive me?"

"Only if you cook breakfast rather than magic it," I replied firmly. "Bacon and eggs, fried bread and coffee please." I had seen enough magic for a while. No wonder that so many seekers after the Clavicula had gone mad; much more of this and I would be following their example. "We might have to do more sailing than I'd intended today and I hardly feel fit for it at the moment." I continued. "The fog isn't lifting, but we should get a wind to blow it away in an hour or so."

"You consume too much cholesterol," she said strictly. "It's bad for you."

"So are black witches, ghostly apparitions, messages from the dead, invisible writing and sundry demons," I replied. "Not to mention feline familiars, freighters and fogs. I need to keep my strength up."

Sammie succumbed and busied herself with the stove and the contents of the small fridge.

XXV - 08.30 Tuesday 21st December

"They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but mine own vineyard have I not kept."

By the time that I returned to the cockpit, I felt reasonably fortified, despite the lack of sleep. The sky had lightened considerably and the fog was indeed beginning to thin out and blow about as the breeze got up. The visibility was already probably the best part of a mile. There was a smudge of darker colour in the murk almost dead ahead and the suggestion of a sound of breaking waves. One or two seabirds had found us and were circling raucously overhead, but none ventured to descend to the deck.

"Can I take it that none of these is Charlotte in drag?" I said to Sammie, who had followed me on deck and stood surveying the seascape in all directions, blonde hair windblown and cheeks a healthy rose colour from the effects of yesterday's exposure to the elements.

"I'm not aware of her presence," she said with a smile. "I'm very glad to say. I need a little time to get my thoughts in order after last night's experiences. I'm not sure I could cope with Charlotte this soon after breakfast."

"There’s a promontory of some sort ahead;" I said. "We’ll have to wait for the fog to lift and see if I can recognise it. It’s on a rather funny bearing if we’re anywhere near where I thought we were. It could be The Needles, though that would mean we'd drifted a long way whilst we were hove to during the night."

Sammie looked forward to the gradually solidifying image of a rocky shoreline. "I have a strange feeling," she said quietly, "that I am not looking at the Isle of Wight here. Do you recognise that lighthouse?"

I looked where her finger was pointing. The slim white tower was just becoming visible; it stood on top of an isolated pinnacle, some way out from a cliff face which towered behind it. There were two distinct lines of surf; one at the lighthouse and one further inshore. It took a moment or two in the dimness for me to be certain, but there was really no possibility that I could be mistaken. Corbière. I had seen it too often from all angles, both seaward and landward, during more than twenty years spent on this island.

"This is not possible!" I gasped. "There is simply no way that we could have made this much distance in the night without hard sailing. And we'd have needed to have picked our way through all sorts of rocks and skerries to the north and west of here, not to mention avoiding running ashore on one of the other islands."

"So, it's Jersey, is it?" Sammie asked, her mood now sombre where moments ago it had been cheery.

"That's Corbière Light; the south western extremity of the island," I replied. "God knows how we got here, but we can make St Helier in less than a couple of hours with this breeze."

"God, I fear, had nothing to do with it," she sighed. "We've been brought here. There's something very powerful at work."

"I thought you said you couldn't sense Charlotte's presence," I protested.

"No more I can," Sammie countered. "I said there was something powerful; I didn't say it had to be Charlotte. I can't see the point of Charlotte going to the trouble of cutting our cable and trying to have us run down at sea, if all she was going to do afterwards was bring us more quickly to the place where we were going anyway. It doesn't make any kind of sense, does it?"

Charlotte or no, I was willing to guarantee we hadn't got here unassisted. These are difficult waters. There is a lot of tidal activity and the Channel floor all around is just a mass of rock pinnacles. I couldn't have sailed that stretch in the dark safely, much less drifted it and the speed that we seemed to have drifted was as fast as we could have sailed. I might have dozed at the helm occasionally, but I was willing to swear I hadn't slept through a three hour reach of Sea Witch making ten knots! Since we had not arrived off Corbière by natural causes I had no choice but to accept unnatural causes.

There was only one explanation, it seemed to me. "Charlotte did not want us to get here safely; somebody else did. The ‘somebody else’ seems to have won. I have to conclude that there’s a second witch involved who’s more than a match for her," I suggested, looking Sammie straight in the eyes.

Her gaze did not waver. "Well don’t look at me!" she declared. "I couldn’t have done anything like this, even if I’d been awake; I guarantee you I can’t sail boats whilst I’m asleep!"

"I believe you," I said, taking her into my arms. "So who else could have done it? Any ideas?"

"The only sea witch I ever heard of is this boat," Sammie said worriedly. "There’s not much call for this sort of work in my part of the world. Maybe whoever it is will let us know. At least for now we can be grateful that she doesn’t seem hostile.

"Mind you, just because another witch may have pulled off a decent nautical spell doesn't make her a match for Charlotte. Sea calming and so on is supposed to be quite simple stuff really. Not simple for the likes of me, I mean, but for somebody who’s worked on her power. A witch who lives near the sea will probably develop quite a skill in it, because she'll be able to practise a lot, but that wouldn't necessarily mean she was any good at anything else."

I thought for a moment. There was one outlandish possibility which didn't sound any more stupid than most of the other ‘facts’ of this case.

"How about Lady Caroline Rigg?" I said.

"She's dead!" retorted Sammie.

"She was drowned in the wreck of the Golden Venture," I insisted. "Her body is thirty fathoms under Biscay. She should have had a lot of practice with the sea."

"Do you know something?" Sammie smiled at last; a smile almost of relief. "You are crazy. That is the most ridiculous idea I have ever heard."

"Enlighten me," I said. "I am unclear why it is any more ridiculous than several other things that have turned out to be true recently." It was good to see her smile. There was too much weight on her shoulders and I was not so much help as I wished.

"I truly never heard of a dead witch working a spell;" Sammie laughed. "Plenty of them, during their lives, worked spells that carried on working after their deaths, yes; Mary Bullivant, for example; but not working spells after death; that would make her more powerful dead than she was alive."

"Because a disembodied witch has no powers and a dead witch is disembodied by definition?" I queried.

Sammie gave me a quizzical look. "You really are catching on very fast," she said.

I wondered whether we had chanced upon one of Sammie's magical blind spots. If Lady Caroline could not have been the instrument of our successful navigation of the Channel by night, it would seem to follow that she could not have helped me find Victoria's book. Yet what seemed to be Lady Caroline's ghost had appeared to Doreen. What seemed to be Lady Caroline's ghost had controlled Edith's hand. And something disembodied had created a flame and lit a candle. Since Sammie's mood had brightened however, I was not about to rain on her parade.

"So our first task, it seems, is to find a seaside witch. Well, I pass," I shrugged. "I definitely did not meet any witches, so far as I know, when I lived here and I'm not in the habit of asking the Jèrriais that I meet in England whether they engage in occult practices."

"I can't help either," Sammie added. "You're the only Jerseyman I know - what was that word you used? Jèrriais?"

"That's our word for ourselves," I said, "and our language too; though hardly anyone speaks it now."

"But you do?" she asked, intrigued. "Go on, say something in it."

It seemed an innocent enough request. "Welcome to Jersey," I said, expansively indicating Corbière Point and the land now becoming visible behind it. "Soyiz bienvenue. Ayiz un bouon temps!"

The coastline behind Corbière was now clearly visible. The heading on which I had left Sea Witch would have carried us a little too close for comfort to the rocks on the south side of the light, so I unrigged the self steering and took the helm again myself.

"We should run up the colours," I said. I nodded to the signals locker just abaft the mast and Sammie went over and opened it.

"Which ensign do you want?" she asked. "There seem to be two here."

I explained that was because Sea Witch was registered in Poole, but I paid for a berth in St Helier as well. It was a sort of present to Fred, but I made almost as much use of it as he did. "So break out the Jersey flag," I said. That would let the harbour authorities know there was no temporary mooring fee to pay and they would, I hoped, let us ashore without our being arrested. There was little chance that the English Customs would have spread the word in the time available. Sammie identified the relevant ensign without further advice and proceeded to bend it on and run it up the jack staff behind me without any help either. Within a minute the shield and diagonal red cross on white of the States of Jersey was flapping smartly in the strengthening breeze.

In less than an hour we had rounded Noirmont, giving a wide berth to the rocks which lie off the point, and were standing into St Aubin's bay. Elizabeth Castle ahead of us brooded over the entrance to St Helier harbour as it has done since Sir Walter Raleigh oversaw its building in 1600.

Sammie was captivated. She noticed a good deal quicker than most newcomers that the castle's central tower, from which flew the same flag as that sported by Sea Witch, was actually a fire control centre that the Germans built during the Second World War. A bit pointless really; the Germans couldn't have defended Jersey against a serious invasion any more than the British could; there are far too many possible landing beaches, unless you had a garrison far too large for the island to maintain. In point of fact neither tried to defend it; the British evacuated without a fight after the fall of France in 1940 and the Germans simply surrendered at the end of the War in 1945.

"That was a long occupation," said Sammie. "You know, people at home have completely forgotten that a part of Britain was occupied during the war. I expect it left a mark on the island in more ways than just concrete."

"My grandfather used to say they nearly starved," I replied. "That was when he first came across the nuns from La Hougue Sainte, as a matter of fact. He was one of those who tried to escape across to Normandy after D Day. He'd somehow got hold of a little dinghy and an outboard motor; God knows how he scrounged the petrol. But the engine swamped when he was just a couple of miles out and the Germans caught him and threw him in the local gaol. The nuns were allowed in to oversee the distribution of Red Cross parcels to the prisoners."

"How did the nuns get to St Helier?" Sammie asked. "I thought you said the convent was in the north of the island?"

"So it is," I smiled, "but you have to remember that Jersey is only nine miles by five. Nowhere is very far from anywhere else. The nuns had the luxury of a donkey cart. They used to bring vegetables in to the prisoners as well, though the guards took most of those; they were half starved too."

As we rounded the castle, I pointed out to Sammie the jetty which connects the castle island to the little outcrop of Hermitage Rock, where the sixth century anchorite Helier, who gave Jersey's capital its name, had spent a decade and a half before being murdered by pirates.

"Ugh," she shuddered. "Imagine spending an hour on a lump of rock like that. How could anyone stand it for fifteen years? I should think his martyrdom was a blessed relief."

Passing Hermitage Rock to port, we rounded its extended jetty and took in the sails. It is easier to approach St Helier harbour under motor. Even at high tide the manoeuvring to avoid the skerries needs good boat handling and I preferred not to test Sammie's unexpected proficiency any further. Inside the confines of the harbour it is quite tight to handle a boat under sail, with the wind eddying from jetties which need to be tall because of the great rise and fall of the tide.

We picked up our buoy without trouble, Sammie displaying a deft touch with the grappling pole, and then faced the tricky task of getting ashore without the dinghy. Fortunately, although the harbour was almost deserted of pleasure craft, we were able to attract the attention of a lobster fisherman preparing to sail and he deposited us on the quayside.

"What a very nice man," Sammie remarked, as she stood recovering her equilibrium on the quay and watched the lobster man's boat move, engine puttering away, out through the harbour entrance.

"The Jèrriais are very hospitable people," I said.

Sammie craned her neck back to look up the hillside at the walls of Fort Regent. "That's not another castle is it?" she asked. "It looks like nineteenth century military engineering."

I had never before felt so much pleasure in being a guide. "That's right, it is. If it's castles you want, the best on the island is Mont Orgeuil at Gorey in the east. That was the residence of the governor until the invention of gunpowder made it rather too vulnerable and Elizabeth Castle was built out there in the Bay. We can probably find the time to go and see Gorey, if you like."

Sammie's eyes sparkled. "I'm going to like your island, Toby," she said. "It's a pity we have so little time. We'll come again when this is all over, won't we?" She seemed very confident. I was less sanguine, but at least we had now put the Channel between us and the Borminster coven. For the time being we were probably safe.

"Where is your mother's home?" Sammie asked. "How do we get there?"

"The north side of town up Mont à l'Abbé," I replied. "I was intending to go there first, though I know Maman will be at work. She works in a bank now. She always used to do the books for our business. We can walk there; it's only about ten minutes."

We made our way past the entrance to the tunnel under Fort Regent and through the centre of town to The Parade, where the gardens were decked with a combination of Christmas and Millennium decorations and the streets were busy with last minute purchasers of presents and other festive fare. As we passed the end of Gloucester Street, I pointed out to Sammie where the gaol had stood in which my grandfather had been imprisoned.

"Was this your father's father? Another Le Tocq?" she enquired. "Judging by the shop names around here I would say that's a typical Jersey name. The names seem to be like Norman or Breton names, full of c's and q's."

I was impressed by her powers of observation. "It was my mother's father I was talking about; Grandpapa Henri. He's still alive. He's in his late seventies now. He has a place out in the sticks in St Mary's; not far from the convent in fact."

"I'd love to meet him," said Sammie. "He must have some fascinating stories to tell."

"I suspect you'll find it hard to avoid meeting all of my family, this being a very small island and Christmas week," I said.

I thought that a few days with the family would be good. The less time we had to worry about Michael and Charlotte and the more time we had to rest before we met them again, the better.

Sammie looked wistful. "I'm not sure I can cut my family's Christmas altogether. They might start to panic. They think I've finished with you, remember? So they're not going to think I'm shacked up with another guy so quickly. They'll think I've done a runner and they might start using spells to get me back. And at some stage they're going to want to give me the necklace. They'll claim they had had replica made for me of the one found in the garden. They think I'm an idiot."

"You'll surely be safer from their spells if you stay at long range from your family until the last minute," I countered. "Them and their friend Baal."

"Baal is hardly their friend," she replied. "Just a centennial acquaintance."

"It's a bit more than that this time," I said. "The Millennium is supposed to be only the third opportunity the world has ever had to recover Solomon's Key. Apparently Baal guards a book that contains the secrets of Solomon's power. Once every thousand years if the right person does the right thing they can unlock the hiding place of this Great Grimoire, as they call it."

Sammie's pace slowed. She switched her bag from one hand to the other. "You don't say," she replied tersely. "That part of the story is news to me; aren't I lucky to be around for an extra special party?"

I was afraid that I had shocked her. I suppose I knew by then that I could not deflect her from her plan to return to Borminster and I did not want to undermine her confidence any further. I remembered her warning that black witchcraft would thrive on self doubt.

"Well, somehow I can't see Michael as a sorcerer in the same league as Solomon, can you?" I asked. "I believe that you are in serious danger, but I suspect the rest of the world is safe."

Sammie stopped walking and turned and faced me. There was real anger in her eyes. A couple of passing shoppers interrupted their hurrying by to stare at us.

"You idiot!" she exclaimed. "How many times do I have to tell you? It's not Michael I have to worry about; it's Charlotte. Charlotte is in a league of her own. You are just like all the other men she meets; you can't believe that anyone so good looking and charming could be so evil, can you? It hardly matters if the rest of them are minor forces like Michael and Gough. Charlotte can wield the power of all thirteen collectively. On her own Charlotte is powerful. Can you imagine what she can do with twelve more minds at her disposal?"

She looked as though she was close to crying, but there were no tears in her eyes. Is it true that witches can't cry? I was stricken by the sight of her distraught face. She was very afraid, trying to face up to what she feared and I was no help at all.

"Forgive me," I begged. "I'm not handling this very well, am I? Bear with me, can you? I'm only human after all."

Sammie's angry expression softened and she kissed me briefly on the lips. The shoppers smiled and went on their way. "I'm human too," she said, "even if I come from a family of witches."

As we walked on up Elizabeth Place into Rouge Bouillon, she went on, "You need to get some sleep, that’s what it is. I'm pretty tired myself, despite having dozed last night. That's what's making us irritable. We'll maybe just have a rest before your mother comes home and we can talk about what we're going to do and how long I'm going to stay when we feel better."

I had to admit that she was right. I had wondered if we might be able to drive out to the convent in the afternoon, but the following morning would do just as well. I rather fancied the idea of showing off my girl to the family. I thought it very likely that Sammie would charm them all and she wouldn't need to use any witchcraft.

My mother had an attractive two bedroom flat half way up the hill. It was on an upper floor and had a balcony looking back towards the sea. One bedroom was always left ready for my visits. She was expecting us, because I had phoned from London the previous morning and though she might well have anticipated being home before we arrived, she would have left everything prepared. I let us in and then dropped the bags in the living room whilst I inspected the kitchen. Sammie, more pragmatically, did not wait to be shown around and found her way straight to my bedroom.

"There's a note her from your mother," she called through to me.

"What's it say?" I asked.

"Toby, I can understand French," Sammie pouted, "but this would take me half an hour. You'll have to read it for yourself. Something about cousin Judith?"

Now that was very odd. My mother spoke Jèrriais, but she knew that I hardly ever used it and in any case she would have regarded it as being just as impolite in normal circumstances to leave a note which Sammie could not read as to speak in a foreign language and exclude a guest from the conversation. Also, of course, I had no cousin Judith. The only Judith I knew was D S Silver and I had not expected to hear from her whilst I was in Jersey. I put the kettle on and went through to see what the note said.

"I didn't know you spoke Jèrriais at home," said Sammie, handing it over. "That's marvellous! You'll have to teach me some before your mother gets back, so that I can say hello to her properly."

"Maman speaks perfect English;" I said. "though she'd be flattered if a visitor took the trouble to learn Jèrriais. There are so few speakers of it now."

I scanned quickly though the note. It was the usual list of directions of where to find what, that mothers always seem to find it necessary to leave for their returning offspring when they have been away for a few months. The second paragraph, which Sammie had noticed, said that Cousin Judith was on a visit from England and staying at Swanson's Hotel on the Esplanade. She couldn't stay for Christmas, but would like to see me before she went home.

D S Silver obviously went in for covering her tracks in a big way. First the greeting when I had met her in Lincoln and now a conspiracy involving my mother and presumably designed to conceal her identity from Sammie. Judith had of course asked me not to talk to Sammie about the investigation into Orson, but I was intrigued as to what cover story she had used to draw my mother into the plot.

Obviously Sammie would have to be distracted if I were to speak to my friendly policewoman alone and I was willing to bet that some scheme to achieve that objective would already have been drawn up. But why on earth had she needed to come to Jersey in person? The implication was that there was some urgency and a need for secrecy. Nevertheless, it would have to wait. Right now I just needed to crash out.

"Cousin Judith is at Swanson's Hotel," I explained to Sammie. "Just on a flying visit. I haven't seen her for quite a while." It was barely four days in fact. "She's off home before Christmas. I'll maybe find the time to look in on her, but right now I need to get my head down."

"You do that," said Sammie. "And I'll find an overcoat and go and sit on the balcony. This is a marvellous place for sunbathing. It's the only place I've been for a week where the temperature is above freezing!"

"How are you on central heating spells?" I groaned. Within a few minutes I was asleep, lying fully clothed on the bed. I was more tired than I thought. By the time that I woke and orientated myself to my fifth different set of surroundings in as many days, it was well past noon. The smell of freshly percolating coffee drifted through from the kitchen.

I made my way there via the bathroom and found Sammie as at home as she had been in the galley of the Sea Witch.

"You needn't think I'm becoming domesticated, just because I'm making you a third consecutive meal," she said. "I hope your mother won't mind me making use of what's here. I thought I might get lost if I tried to go out to the shops."

"Knowing my mother, I expect she has enough food in to feed an army for the duration of a siege," I replied. "There probably isn't room to store any more. How was the sunbathing?"

"I lasted half an hour," she laughed. "The view is superb, but it really is still pretty cold. I had a little snooze myself on the couch. I didn't want to disturb you. Did you sleep well?"

I lied. Actually I had had a peculiar dream about a sea monster called Baal, who could emerge from the surf through that strange aperture in the cliff face in St Mary Nord called Le Creux de la Touraille, known to the tourists as Devil's Hole. I had not been there for years and I had not thought about it for a similar length of time; now here it was in my dream, with the monster able to come and go through it into a dimension outside space and time.

There is a viewing platform with a concrete parapet there now, but I dreamed I had gone down inside the Hole, using the old steps that the storm washed away many years ago. As I clung to the old iron railing beside the steps, a surge of surf spouted up the rocks opposite me and then fell away, revealing as it did so a beast with the head and torso of a man, but lower limbs covered in scales and long clawed webbed feet, just like the satyr at Borminster Hall. My subconscious must have been mixing up my mythology pretty well, because the demon waved a trident at me and shouted that his time had come and nothing that I could do would stop him.

"The world is mine!" he roared. "Three thousand years I have wrestled with your chains, Solomon. Now one comes who will release me! I shall rule through her! Red is her colour; red shall be her reign!"

In the dream I had found myself unable to speak, whether through fear or through ignorance of what to say, I don't know. Dreams are rarely the most logical of our experiences. The surf lashed into my face again and as I clung to the railing and looked back again at where Baal had stood, he was gone. I was wringing wet and as I tried to claw my way back to the top of the steps, out of the deep chasm, I suddenly awoke. The realism of the dream had been enough to make me sweat and I had needed to fling a good bit of water over myself in the bathroom before I could persuade myself that the dream was gone.

"Toby, what's the matter?" asked Sammie. "You look as if you'd seen another ghost."

I didn't want to add to her fears with stories of demons from my over-active imagination. I put her arm around her and said, "I'm out of practice for being in bed on my own; I need you around when I wake up."

"When you go to bed with me," she replied with a giggle, "I require you to take your clothes off, not leave them on. By the way, is your mother was going to mind our sharing a room?" This was a seriously compromising question, albeit asked in her usual apparently artless fashion. What she was really asking was whether I had ever shared the room with another woman before. I supposed I had better come clean on that score at some stage, but preferably a much later stage.

"No," I replied, "she is, fortunately, reconciled to the fact that I'm all grown up now. Anyway she was a teenager in the sixties herself. I'm not sure that the permissive society quite flourished in Jersey, but she's never been prudish."

Whilst Sammie served up lunch, our conversation turned to the reason for our visit to Jersey; a trip to La Hougue Sainte to research the last days of the woman whose articulate summary of her family's history had proved so illuminating. Victoria Delabor had travelled to Jersey late in 1899. If Lady Caroline's messages were to be believed, Victoria had never returned to Borminster. Supposing her family had followed her to Jersey and she had met her end here, would there be any records other than those which might exist at the convent? It seemed unlikely that a ritual murder in 1899 would have been performed any more publicly than that of 1799, or that the body would have been less well hidden

I doubted that harbour authorities would have kept very detailed records of comings and goings in those days, so someone who came but never departed would not have been likely to attract attention. Equally, a new arrival at a convent who disappeared again suddenly would hardly be an unheard of phenomenon. I supposed that it happened from time to time that women who imagined themselves to have a vocation thought better of it after a few weeks of discipline and hardship and sneaked quietly away. It might even be that such a short novitiate would not feature in the convent's records and the trail would go cold again.

Somehow I thought it would not. My dream had given me a conviction, albeit irrational, that the search for Victoria would end here in Jersey. I could not explain the link between the two, but the convent was barely a mile from Devil's Hole.

"We're not going to have enough daylight to go up to the convent today," I said. "I don't want to be driving around up there after dark. The roads up in St Mary Nord are diabolical. If you meet a truck you end up reversing a hundred yards to find a stretch wide enough to let it by. That sort of thing is best done when you can see where you're going."

Sammie broke my dream. "I've been looking at a map of the island I found while you were asleep," she said. "I found St Mary Nord. What's this place called Devil's Hole?"

I was so surprised that I almost couldn't reply, but after a moment's hesitation I answered. "It's rather an odd geological formation just by the coast; the sea has cut a cave through the cliff face into a deep combe in the hillside behind. At high tide the water comes in through the tunnel and floods the hole. You can get some fairly impressive surges of surf up inside it when it's rough and there's a wind blowing."

"I'd like to see that," she said enthusiastically.

"It's not far from the convent," I replied. "We could go there tomorrow. Put on your walking shoes though; it's a pretty steep path down to it. I'll have to check when it's high tide."

"No," she said, "low tide."

"There's nothing to see at low tide except a hole in the ground and a tunnel through the cliff."

"That's what I want to see," smiled Sammie. "It'll be safe to go down inside it then, won't it? It sounds just the sort of place I need."

"Need for what?" I asked in mystification. "It's an interesting piece of geology, but I can't say it's ever struck me as being of any use."

"Ah well," Sammie smiled, "That is because you are not a warlock, you see.

A place that's neither sea nor land,
Between salt water and the strand,
That is where to make a stand,
If you'd force a demon's hand."

I looked perplexed and she laughed. "I don't know why so many spells seem to involve reciting doggerel. It makes the whole business seem rather immature, doesn't it? Nevertheless, they do seem to work. That's one my mother taught me when we visited the blow hole at Tintagel. I must have been only eight or nine, but I've never forgotten it. Isn't that funny?"

"You can use a sea cave in a protective spell, is that it?" I asked. "Isn't it rather a long way from Borminster?"

"You said in Jersey nowhere was very far from anywhere else," she replied. "The Void is like that, or so I believe. There should be no reason why I can't use this cave against Charlotte. It should be all the more effective because she doesn't know where it is."

"And how would you use it exactly?"

"'Exactly' would take too long to explain," she said. "Briefly, caves are places where you can trap spirits; they become disorientated when the earth is over their heads. It's even better when the caves are like tunnels with an entrance at each end."

"I don't think you should use this particular cave," I said uneasily.

"Why not? It sounds perfect to me," she frowned.

"I don't know. I just have a bad feeling about this one. I can show you some others; there are plenty. Wolf's Caves up in St John's for example."

"You have a bad feeling?" she smiled. "Toby you aren't sensitive to astral waves; you showed that clearly enough at Charlotte's house. If you have a bad feeling it's because you're over-tired and we haven't made love for two days. We could put that right you know."

Sammie's plans to put that right were thwarted by the arrival of my mother. Her job allowed her flexi-hours and she had made a very early start in the morning in order to be home in time to meet us. However, after an initial round of greetings, her surprise at finding us already installed in the flat was speedily overcome by the discovery that she and Sammie had three hours shopping time in the afternoon, which could not possibly be wasted.

"There is no better way for two women to get acquainted," she declared, "than to go shopping together. Did you tell Sammie there's no VAT here? No? I thought as much. You, Toby, we don't need. You can go and say hello to Cousin Judith at Swanson's. She has to leave tomorrow. We'll see you at dinner time."

Somewhat to my amusement, Sammie was more than agreeable. We all walked together back to Gloucester Street and then the two of them continued down The Parade, whilst I made my way to Swanson's. As I watched them disappear into the crowds, engaged in animated conversation, I reflected that Maman was as unfathomable as ever. Did she really think that shopping was the best ice-breaker, or was she simply seizing an opportunity to comply with Judith Silver's request for a private audience with me?

My thoughts returned to what could have been so urgent as to bring Judith to the island. I would have been surprised if my little bit of play acting with Charlotte had paid dividends so quickly, but there seemed only one way to find out.

XXVI - 15.30 Tuesday 21st December

"Wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness."

"I think it was a bit devious," I said to Judith Silver as she welcomed me into her hotel room, "to involve my mother in this subterfuge. I find it difficult enough to keep secrets from Sammie; now I'll have to speak in code in front of her."

The room faced the sea and its window looked out across the decorations on the Esplanade towards Elizabeth Castle, where the floodlights had already been switched on as the daylight began to fade. The tide was out and the circuitous causeway leading to the castle was exposed. A single figure was trekking slowly along it back towards the town. It looks about two hundred yards and is actually the best part of a mile.

Judith Silver looked even better than when I had last seen her; that is, about as unlike the archetypal image of a policewoman as it is possible to look. The seaward facing rooms at Swanson's are not cheap even at this time of year and the hotel appeared to be doing quite a reasonable business with Christmas visitors and Millennium celebrations. I assumed that her Squad's expense accounts needed to allow its officers to simulate a reasonably affluent lifestyle, but the Detective Sergeant was dressed like someone who could afford this sort of trip every day of the week.

She wore an exceptionally smart and expensive-looking black suit, not off-the-peg, and the same simple gold jewellery that I had seen before. The pony-tail hairstyle had been replaced by a something altogether more affluent in appearance. She was very much the successful businesswoman, complete with lap-top computer sitting open on the dressing table, plugged into the telephone socket.

In spite of the carefully constructed image she had still had me sent up to her room rather than meeting me downstairs in the bar. "The subterfuge was for your benefit," she replied simply. "As far as I know, Sammie isn't aware that you've been supplying information about her uncle; I reckoned you'd have less trouble explaining a visit from a long lost cousin than one from a police officer. Your mother was happy to oblige, when I explained the circumstances."

"You told my mother that my girlfriend was the niece of a big-league crook?" I exclaimed. "Thanks a bunch!"

Judith smiled. "I told your mother that your work for us was covered by the Official Secrets Act and that Sammie was not involved."

Something in that remark did not ring true. On the face of it, it was a reasonable response, delivered without any change of intonation, but somehow my suspicions were aroused as though I was talking to a criminal rather than a cop.

"She wouldn't have believed that on the strength of a Fine Arts and Antiques Squad warrant card," I prompted. "What did you show her?"

"I showed her a warrant card from Special Branch," Judith shrugged. "What of it?"

Something was more than a little fishy here. I had never heard of a policeman, or policewoman, with more than one warrant card, or cards from two different branches of the service. The warrant card that I had seen in Lincoln had looked genuine enough; she certainly had contacts with both the Lincoln police and my local force and the number which she had left with me really was the number of the Fine Arts and Antiques Squad at New Scotland Yard.

"I suppose you are really a policewoman?" I asked.

"Absolutely," she replied. "Why else would I be chasing a villain?"

I didn't know, but it occurred to me that the police force was the mother of all cover stories. Yet involving me seemed unnecessarily risky. Was she perhaps interested in Harry Kerridge for some reason other than art smuggling? Sammie had been positive that Harry was not smuggling narcotics. I found it implausible that he was a spy. This case had developed lunatic elements but I had detected not the slightest hint of the hand of government. Nor did I think it likely that Judith was somehow in league with a rival crook. Nevertheless, for some reason she seriously wanted Harry out of circulation.

"Maybe you'd like to put Harry Kerridge away for smuggling because it's easier than explaining your real reason," I suggested. As Marlowe would have pointed out, they had put Capone away for tax evasion.

"My, we are sharp today," Judith smiled again.

"I think," I said, choosing my words carefully, "that you may be about to let me in on a secret. That wasn't a careless slip - telling me about the two warrant cards. Being a policewoman is just your day job; you're actually some kind of intelligence agent. And agents don't blow their own cover for no reason, so you need something from me that I wouldn't give to the police."

"Actually if my people knew what I'm doing they'd probably kill me," she confided in quite a matter of fact tone. "You have no security clearance; I'm exercising a field officer's emergency prerogative of deciding who needs to know what. The fact is, I expected you might be more than a little surprised that I came after you to Jersey in such a rush. I knew that you were smart enough to ask the right questions and so I'm willing to tell you some of the answers. But before I do, I have to make one thing clear. I'm afraid it's what all of the big screen agents say in all of the trashy movies. Possession of information gives you vulnerability at the same time as motivation. The information is more valuable to my organisation than your life or my life; if at any time we become a security risks then …"

"They will have to kill us," I completed. I had seen all the trashy movies too, but the words somehow didn't sound funny when delivered in that tone of voice by a woman that I already knew to be unusually efficient and thorough. "All right, you wouldn't expect any sane person to agree to help you on those terms, but you're not here because you expect me to disagree. It follows that you think we're on the same side for some other reason. My only real priority is Sammie's safety, but after that I want to prevent anyone else being murdered if I can. So the implication is that by helping you I help her. Would you care to explain how, exactly?"

"Please believe me when I tell you that if you knew my objective then you'd share it; you and every other decent human being," Judith said. From the look in her eyes I knew that she was telling the truth. "And I can help you to save Sammie at the same time. I have a lot of resources at my disposal that you don't and we're both targeting the same event. What I want you to do will in no way compromise your access to that event and might even help you. I can't say more until I at least have your word to say nothing about what I'm going to tell you; nothing to Sammie; nothing to anyone."

I nodded my assent.

"Very well then," she took a deep breath. "To begin with Harry Kerridge really is a smuggler and I really do want to catch him at it; I just need to do it in the next ten days."

"Before the Millennium," I observed. "Now there for a start is something that our objectives have in common. However in your case I'm not sure that there's a love interest involved, although you know I just can't help the effect I have on women."

"Behave yourself!" she snapped, but the expression on her face was far from angry. "There are things that I think it's ethical to conceal from Sammie and things that I don't. I never mix business with pleasure."

"I'm glad you think it might be a pleasure," I smiled. "Now what exactly is the business? Let's begin with the name. Are you really called Judith Silver?"

"Have been for years," she replied, "when I'm not being called 'Hey Jude!'"

"And you're Jewish," I pressed, "and I think that's a relevant fact in this case."

"As I said, you're sharp today," she replied quietly.

"And what's the interest in Harry Kerridge? Is it the Lithuanian connection?"

"Old-hat cold war stuff," she shook her head dismissively. "Lithuania will be in the European Union before long. Nadia Delabor can have all the Russian contacts she likes;

the more the merrier."

"Speaking of which," I said, prompted by this exchange to fish out the photograph of the ikon from my pocket, "I took a picture of this little number that I found in the safe at Borminster Hall. You might be interested in it."

Judith Silver's expression registered more surprise than she intended it should. "You found it in the safe?" she said. "What were you doing in the safe?"

It was my turn to be uninformative; "I was pursuing my enquiries," I replied.

"Toby Le Tocq you have genuine talent," she applauded. "I said you were too undisciplined to be a policeman, but there might be other career opportunities open to you."

"Thanks all the same," I said, "but I have a career already."

From her attaché case she took a hand held scanner which she proceeded to plug into the laptop and then run over the photograph. The lap-top evidently had fax software; within a very short space of time the picture and an accompanying explanation was despatched … but to where?

"So if you're not chasing Harry Kerridge as a spy, what has he done to interest you?" I asked when she had finished. "Have you been after him for long?"

"About twelve years," she said. "Not me personally, you understand, but the people I work for. Ever since he disappeared when he finished his doctorate and reappeared a few months later in England under a false name."

I gathered that wherever Harry, or whatever his name was, had done his doctorate wasn't in England.

"His name isn't Harry Kerridge?" I asked.

"No," she confirmed, "it's Harry Kerr." I had heard that surname before in this case; it took me a moment to remember where. "Harry's father went by a double-barrelled name," Judith continued. "In his former life Harry just used the first half."

I placed the name Kerr; Victoria Kerr, a member of the Rigg family, who had died in childhood before 1850. She had been the other Victoria; chronologically, the first Victoria. Victoria Kerr. Kerr - Kerr-Rigg - Kerridge. All of a sudden the light dawned; it was a genuine touch of Archimedes' bath night, but I managed to refrain from running naked along the Esplanade shouting

"Eureka!"

"Let me guess," I said, "His father used the name Kerr-Rigg?"

"Have you ever been a contestant on a quiz show?" Judith smiled. "You should do very well. How did you reach that conclusion?"

"I originally had ten candidates for the dubious distinction of being the body in the garden. One of them, Lord George's daughter Lady Isobel Rigg, turned out to have died in India in 1850 and was supposed to be the last of the Kesford line when the junior branch of the family, the Delabors, inherited the estate. When she was young, Lady Isobel would not have been a very good match, what with having a disgraced father and an insane mother and all. She eventually did marry, in her thirties, a Scottish naval officer called Captain Douglas Kerr, who took her to India but died shortly afterwards. They had one daughter, Victoria, who predeceased her mother, according to the family tree."

"And now you're thinking, what if this Victoria didn't die young?" enquired Judith.

"This family appears to have a long tradition of unexplained or suspicious disappearances by their womenfolk. If, despite what the records say, Victoria was still alive in 1850 then she was the heir and not the Delabors; but she would have been well out of the way in India and still in her teens. She might not have been best placed to resist the take-over of the estate."

"Especially," Judith added, "if the usurpers had produced convincing evidence that the real Victoria was dead and that this supposed Victoria was an impostor."

"You've heard this story before," I said.

"Maybe not all of it that you have," she replied, "Go on."

"Sir Richard Delabor was a military hero in India," I continued. "He would have had a lot of political influence; Victoria Kerr by contrast was the daughter of a penniless naval officer. But if Victoria survived and had children then they were cheated by the Delabors. So the family called themselves Kerr-Rigg as a means of reinforcing their claim for restitution. This is a vendetta."

"Well done," said Judith quietly. "Give the gentleman a cigar." She seemed to be acknowledging that my conclusion was correct.

"You've done far more research into Harry's background than could be relevant to smuggling," I noted.

"Oh, the research was relevant, right enough," she said, "from our point of view, that is. And you have the story exactly right. There was a minor fuss at the time, but Victorian lawyers probably invented the principle that possession was nine tenths of the law. The Kerr-Riggs drifted off into obscurity and were forgotten about."

"Until your friends, whoever they are, unearthed their sad tale."

"Indeed."

"And decided to pursue a *pro bono* case to restore the dispossessed? I don’t think so; that hardly squares with wanting to put Harry away before the Millennium. Now I know how the Millennium fits into my case. Suppose you tell me how it fits into yours?"

"Well, to begin with you're right again," Judith smiled. "I don't care whether Harry Kerridge should really own Michael Delabor's estate or not. I doubt if he would really want to; he's much richer than his brother-in-law is. You must have noticed? Borminster Hall is fairly tacky, even if it is a stately home."

She was perfectly right and I had noticed. Sir Michael wouldn't have done his deal with the National Trust if he could have afforded to run the Hall on his own; it obviously gave him a host of unwelcome complications for organising the Millennium ritual.

On the other hand Harry Kerridge was really very well off; he must have been a successful smuggler for years. The Chippendale in his parlour, the Dior that Charlotte wore all the time, the Chateau Mouton-Rothschild and two domestic servants were clear evidence of serious affluence. But it couldn't be just a coincidence that a descendant of Victoria Kerr should reappear at the ancestral home and marry into the junior branch of his own family.

"Does Charlotte Kerridge know who Harry really is?" I asked Judith.

"You tell me," she smiled, "I think you possibly know her better than I do."

I let that innuendo go by; if Charlotte knew of Harry's origins she wouldn't be likely to have shared the information with me.

Two more realisations now came to me almost at once. Sammie was right about Michael but wrong about Harry. Michael was not rich enough. The ritual involved treasure; Michael would be relying upon Charlotte to supply it. But Sammie was wrong in believing that Harry Kerridge was not a warlock. As a descendant of Victoria Kerr, he would have inherited her witch blood. Sammie had assured me that one witch could recognise another, but Harry was not a member of the Borminster coven. That meant he was able to conceal his status from the other witches in the area.

It was hard to believe that Charlotte could be as powerful as Sammie alleged and yet be deceived by her own husband. This suggested that Charlotte and Harry together had secrets from the rest; yet Charlotte had seemed so close to Michael and Nadia probably played some role in Harry’s smuggling activities. I had once been struggling to grasp the existence of witchcraft; now I seemed to be looking at the possibility of occult double-agents! I still lacked a piece of this puzzle. There was something that I was missing. I backtracked.

"You said Harry did a doctorate," I said. "Was it in fine arts? Is that the source of the knowledge on which he bases the smuggling?"

"He majored in fine arts in his first degree," she replied. "His doctorate was in archaic middle eastern languages."

There was certainly more to our Harry than met the eye.

"What languages in particular?" I asked, with just the beginnings of an idea.

"Amharic and Aramaic," she replied.

The languages of Sheba and Solomon, I thought. The idea took more shape.

"And where exactly did he pursue this obscure course of study?" I continued.

"At the Hebrew University in Jerusalem," Judith told me. Things began to fall rapidly into place.

"He isn't a Jew," I objected. "How could he study there?"

"Oh but he is," she corrected me. "He converted. It's a very difficult process for a gentile to go through; he managed it with flying colours."

"He gives absolutely no indication of that today," I said.

"No more than he uses his real name," she nodded.

"I assume therefore that our Harry was pretty keen to study in Jerusalem?" I asked.

"A reasonable assumption."

"And you aren't going to tell me why?" I said.

"Come along Toby," she replied. "You already know why."

I had been resisting the conclusion that Judith’s mission was involved in some way with the witchcraft. I had worked out for myself that practitioners of the craft were more likely to be beautiful than ugly; on that basis Judith would have qualified too. But that was not the connection.

"You’re not a witch," I said. It was a statement of fact not a question. Witchcraft had never previously been mentioned in any of our conversations. She simply smiled. "If you were," I continued, "you wouldn’t need to use the police force to track Harry and you wouldn’t be looking to put Harry in gaol. On the other hand I have now been talking about witches for ten seconds and you are not looking at me as though I were a lunatic; you are in fact looking at me like someone who is waiting for me to make another connection."

Judith went on waiting; she said nothing. One more piece of the puzzle dropped into place; I knew who had bought the witch's diary from Raphael. It was not Charlotte, trying to conceal the family's history of witchcraft; it was Harry.

"Would I be right in thinking that Harry made a study of ancient documents relating to King Solomon?" I asked Judith.

"You might," she replied.

"Since when," I asked, "did Mossad concern itself with religious mythology? I always took your lot for a very pragmatic crowd."

Her face registered slight surprise for the very first time. "Who said anything about Mossad?" she asked. "And why do you call it mythology?" she continued. "My agency exists specifically to handle this problem. Of course we take it seriously; it's potentially the biggest threat to our national existence since the state was re-founded, Arabs looking for nuclear weapons not excluded. It comes out of our own history and we should be the first to be destroyed, just as we were when we failed to handle it properly in the first millennium after Solomon. It took us nearly two thousand years to recover from that mistake; we are not about to repeat it."

I have said that my powers of credence had necessarily been expanded but this was almost a twist too far. "Am I seriously to believe that an Israeli state agency exists to monitor the activities of people trying to obtain the *Clavicula Solomonis*?"

"You think the potential destruction of the nation and a return to the Diaspora is not sufficient to merit the government's attention?" There was no annoyance in Judith Silver's eyes. "I'm not surprised to find scepticism," she confirmed, "just rather surprised that someone who knows what you know is still sceptical."

"I apologise," I said. "Part of my brain is still in denial. I can still hardly believe that I'm taking this seriously myself." I took a deep breath and started again. "So what makes Harry in particular worthy of your attention? And why is it so important to lock him up before the Millennium?"

"We have teams watching more than a dozen people that we're taking seriously," she said simply. "Harry's not just another crank that needs to be prevented from getting lucky. He's very close. He's close to insane, but he's also close to genius."

"The family vendetta got him started, but what keeps him going is obsession," I suggested.

She nodded. "He understands what he's dealing with better than we do; all his life has been dedicated to this one end."

"Wealth is just a means to the end?"

"That's right. He planned the acquisition of that wealth meticulously, but it's still just a means, as you say. And it's not a coincidence that Harry returned to his ancestral home. He knows how much power will be devoted to summoning Baal by other members of his family. He needs that power, or he would have moved earlier to eliminate some of the family who could be obstacles in his way."

"I understand now why you involved me in the case." I nodded. "Harry has been covering his tracks too well and time is running too short."

"It's taken me five years to work my way into a position where I can get any sort of handle on him," she confessed. "And we've run so close to the wire now that I've got pretty desperate. The British police didn't even know about Harry when I first joined the force. When orthodox strategies will not yield results in the required time, you have to try the unorthodox."

"Do you have other people watching Michael Delabor and

Charlotte Kerridge?" I asked.

"We have a team covering the whole crowd; that's how I knew that Sammie wasn't in on it. But Harry is the key figure in this. The rest of them are all bit-part players, except perhaps his wife. As I said, you know her better than I do; we could never get close. We did try to get male agents to ... well, make friends with her, as you might say. We tried that twice; she smelled a rat both times. You have talents."

I paused. "What I don't yet understand," I said, "is why you've decided to come clean with me now. I understand about the pressure of time, but I don't see what more I can do to help you."

Judith looked at me earnestly. "I met a very strange man in Lincoln; only I'm not at all sure he was a man, if you see what I mean." She looked at me for understanding and may have seen a little; at any rate she was encouraged to continue. "My religion teaches that very rarely, on special occasions, there are messengers sent from God." She paused and then asked, "Are you religious, Toby? Do you know the history of your own name?"

I understood. "You met Raphael," I said.

She nodded. "Raphael was sent to you; but he visited me too."

I sighed. "I meet someone named for the angel who taught exorcism to Tobias at the very time I needed to understand demonology. And there was I persuading myself that it was just a coincidence." I could hardly credit that we were still standing in a bedroom in Swanson's. By rights both of us should be locked up in Bedlam. "But Thurles' Bookshop does have a history in Lincoln; it's legit, I checked."

"There is a real Thurles who really sells books; he just doesn't happen to be the Thurles that we both met."

Stop me if you've heard this one before. I had been forced to believe six impossible things before breakfast on each of the last six days; the world was not what I had believed it to be and life was not a simple matter of mundane work and frivolous amusements. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, saith the preacher.

"I'm not, or at least I wasn't, a religious person," I replied. "Two weeks ago I didn't believe angels existed."

"Nor demons, nor witches," she added.

"Nor ghosts," I completed. That was one piece of information Judith lacked. I filled her in on the details.

"I knew I was right," she breathed softly when I'd finished. "You don't know it yet, but you're special. Too many coincidences, Toby; I don't think I chose you after all, but you have certainly been chosen."

"Tell me what Raphael said to you," I asked.

She told me that Raphael had knocked on the door of her room in the Post House. "I didn't introduce myself," she said. "As soon as I opened the door he just said, 'Hello Judith, I'm Raphael.' He told me things about myself that no-one knows; not Mossad, not the CIA, not the KGB. He knew everything I was doing; he knew about Harry Kerridge; he knew about the Millennium. He said I must ensure that Harry was arrested before then … And he said that Tobias would need my help and that it would be in my best interest to give him all the help that I could."

"He seems to have spoken a good deal more plainly to you than he did to me," I observed. "Are you sure that it isn't you that's been chosen?"

"Quite sure," she replied. "He made it clear that I was to help you, not the other way around."

"He doesn't fit the traditional image of an angel," I argued. "What happened to the wings and stuff?"

"Oh come on!" she cried. "Now who's steeped in mythology? Have you read the Book of Tobit lately? Your namesake couldn't tell Raphael from an ordinary man the last time either." She paused as if to recall the event to her mind's eye. "There was a lot of light in the corridor behind him," she went on. "My eyes were dazzled for a moment. When my vision cleared he was gone."

"He didn't mention Sammie?" I asked. "Surely it's Sammie who needs all the help she can get? I'm just a Johnny-come-lately muscling in on the act, although muscle might be a poor choice of simile since everyone around here seems to be able to call on more powers of one sort or another than I can."

"Excuse me!" Judith exclaimed in astonishment. "Do you notice anyone else around here being the subject of messages from God?"

"Point taken," I said.

"As for Sammie, she's the innocent bystander who always gets caught in the crossfire. Saving one innocent bystander doesn't make the other bystanders any safer; getting rid of the shooters is what does that and that is what we're going to do. If we put Harry away, Sammie will be much safer, even if she's still not totally safe because of the rest of her family; if we don't put Harry away and if Baal is released from The Void, there'll be more than a few innocent bystanders to write down as collateral damage."

"And if we put Harry Kerridge inside," I asked, "will that prevent him making the attempt this time?"

"They don't allow you ritual fires in Wormwood Scrubs!" she observed. "He won't get bail; I'll make sure he stays inside until the danger is past. Whether we get a conviction finally or not doesn't matter."

"I think it might!" I said firmly. "He might not be able to send demons after us, but I've already met some very unpleasant gentlemen."

"We can take care of that," she smiled.

"You could just take care of Harry permanently," I suggested.

"I told you, I'm not Mossad," she said. "Those guys have it easy really, because everybody knows that anybody they kill had it coming. Nobody loves a terrorist except another terrorist; maybe not even them.

"Ninety percent of the people who know about people like me," she sighed, "think we're as crazy as your seventeenth century witch-finders. The other ten percent, and fortunately these are the ones in authority, just barely tolerate us. There's no way we could execute a foreign national on foreign soil, or grab him like Eichmann and put him on public trial. Trial for what after all? Intending to commit crimes against humanity?"

"One last question," I said. "Tell me truthfully. Are you sure that your people don't want The Keys for themselves?"

"There are fanatics who do. But just like the last time, no-one knows how to achieve it. That's fortunate I think," she continued. "Take a look at our country. Look at who governs it and how the people behave. Do you believe we could use this power with the wisdom of Solomon? Do you believe anyone could? It wouldn't be the first time we'd turned to the worship of Baal."

"Maybe in another thousand years then?" I smiled.

She smiled back; I think it was relief that she had not misplaced her trust. "Ask me again nearer the time," she said.

"Okay," I conceded. "So what exactly do you want me to do?"

"Pick up a shipment," she smiled.

It seemed that her people had worked very fast when I had told her Harry was on his way to Harwich. They had all his usual shipping routes closed up tighter than a drum and the Belgian police were poking around his safe house. Judith believed that this shipment was related to the Millennium ritual, because Harry was quite unusually keen to move the stuff. He seemed desperate. She was convinced that he would try to move it through me because he was in a corner and he didn't have much choice.

"An agent of his will contact you before Christmas."

"We are close to the wire," I said. "Harry is close to the wire too. After all his meticulous planning, why would he leave something vital so late?"

"Give the gentleman another cigar," said Judith. "We're working on two theories. One is that Harry couldn't get hold of this thing, or things, before and the other that it's not something that he would want to have around for long; a sort of witchcraft equivalent of nitro-glycerine. There's no great bulk to the shipment; they've been moving it in a van."

"So it's the sort of size that we could stash on Sea Witch easily enough, but I might get blown to blazes en route?"

"My reference to nitro was purely figurative," Judith assured me. "As I said, they have ordinary hoods moving the stuff in any ordinary van – not by broomstick."

"Well if you eventually unwrap the packages and find they really do look like low grade art," I said, "you might try scraping the top layer of paint off them."

"What's that?" she seemed puzzled.

"Someone in Borminster is a dab hand at retouching old masters; they disguised part of a Romney in Borminster Hall. What they can do with a part they can do with the whole. If I wanted to move a hot ikon from Lithuania to the States, taking months to make the trip, I reckon that over-painting might be a better disguise than wrapping in oilcloth."

"And the same person would have to be at both ends of the shipment; to put the covering picture on and to take it off." She seemed impressed. "You think it's Nadia!"

"It did seem unnecessarily risky to have Nadia involved in the chain twice," I confirmed, "and she does have a master's degree in painting and sculpture. So, if I were you, I might X-ray any statues as well; they might turn out to have hard centres."

"You are a special man, Toby Le Tocq." Judith gave me a hug. "I won't forget this."

"Hold your horses," I protested. "It's just a theory. It could be wide of the mark."

"Oh, I doubt it," she replied. "You're good at this, aren't you? How did you get to be this smart?"

I shook my head. "Do not make thyself over-wise, saith the preacher," I responded. I had no idea where the text came from.

"Why shouldest thou destroy thyself?" she completed, the smile fading from her eyes.

XXVII - 17.30 Tuesday 21st December

"I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, that ye awake not my love 'til he please."

Mothers and girlfriends do not always get on, so they tell me. It's a Freudian thing. Well I don't believe Maman ever met Freud. When she and Sammie returned from their shopping expedition they were like old friends, talking nineteen to the dozen. Sammie had carrier bags full of clothes and Maman had bags full of meat and vegetables. Sammie tried on the clothes in the bedroom and wouldn't let me see them. Maman commenced cooking in the kitchen.

"You can open the wine, Toby," she said. "Bourgeuil needs to breathe for a good two hours before you drink it."

As I commenced operations with the corkscrew, she glanced over at the closed bedroom door and asked in a whisper, "Is she the one, Toby, do you think?"

"Yes," I said, "I rather think she is."

"I'm so glad," said Maman. "Such a lovely girl. So thoughtful and so intelligent. Exactly what you need."

"Given that I am thoughtless and stupid?" I queried.

"Toby!" she exclaimed. "You know perfectly well I meant no such thing! I simply meant that you meet a lot of the wrong kind of women in your line of work. It's a great relief to me that you've finally decided on one who is not only the right kind, but very nearly perfect."

"Has she bewitched you, then, Maman?" I asked, enjoying the double entendre.

"Not at all!" she replied with mock annoyance, "I just think she's a very nice girl and I like her."

Then I was subjected to the third degree. How had I met Sammie? How long had I known her? Was she connected with one of my cases? She wasn't in any trouble, was she? What were her family like? What did her father do? Maman was disturbed to hear that Sammie was an orphan.

"Orphans can be terribly fragile under the surface, Toby," she warned. "You mind you don't hurt her."

I assured her that I had no intention of ever doing anything of the kind. At that moment Sammie emerged from the bedroom, still wearing her clothes from the boat. I asked when I got to see the new wardrobe.

"All in good time," she grinned. "A girl doesn't want to waste the impact of a new outfit, does she?"

Maman agreed completely and told me to wait my hurry. The two of them were soon chattering away again as though I were not there and so I decided that I might as well not be. I went and sat in the lounge and re-read Victoria's book. I thought for some time about what Raphael and Judith had told me and compared it with Victoria's account and with my recollection of the scene in the walled garden.

I realised that the Riggs and their successors the Delabors, did not really understand the sacrifice through Moloch. The victim must pass through the fire; Mary Bullivant had known that much. Margaret Rigg may well have complied with the requirement through mischance rather than by design. Lord George, despite his researches, had not understood it at all. Was Hester's sacrifice unacceptable? Did that explain why the family had lost the protection of Baal?

And what of the Delabors? They seemed to have become poorer rather than richer in the twentieth century. Had the sacrifice of Victoria been somehow unacceptable too? Was it more likely, as Victoria had thought, that their wealth was dependent upon their business ability, or lack of it, and that they had not drawn power from Baal at all?

I could see why Judith was so concerned about Harry. He had devoted his life to this cause. He was very intelligent and had studied deeply. The Riggs of 1799 and the Delabors of 1899 might have been amateurs, but Harry would not be. If evidence of the correct nature of the sacrifice existed anywhere on earth, I suspected that Harry's research would have found it. But there was our problem; Harry might have taken decades to find the secret of Moloch; we had a matter of days. Wisdom, says the preacher, is good with an inheritance.

Eventually Maman and Sammie emerged from the kitchen and Maman declared that we would have drinks before dinner. I regained some usefulness as the pourer of libations. Sammie sat next to me on the sofa just as she had done at Professor Loder's and snuggled close without earning a single disapproving look from Maman.

"I feel as though I've come home," she said quietly to both of us. "Do you know I had forgotten what it feels like to belong? I haven't felt like this since I was a little girl living with my own parents. I hope I'm not being too presumptuous, Mrs Le Tocq?"

"For goodness sake, Sammie," said Maman, "You must call me Cherie." Sammie smiled. It was a strange smile, as though she did not quite know what to make of being treated as a family member.

After dinner Maman most tactfully retired early to bed and left us to make our own sleeping arrangements. Sammie and I sat up for a while in the firelight, my arm around her as she pillowed her head on my chest. For a long time we said nothing, drawing comfort simply from our physical closeness. Then Sammie raised her head and looked at me.

"I'll show you the outfit I bought now," she smiled. "Now do you remember what I told you to do when you go to bed with me?" It had only been a few hours since our conversation and I was unlikely to have forgotten. I nodded. "Well you go into the bedroom and get ready. I want you to sit on this chair facing the door."

She picked up a wooden dining chair and carried it into the bedroom, placing it several feet from the door and just a couple of feet from the bed. She turned off the ceiling light and switched on a small bedside reading lamp, twisting its flexible stem and directing its shade upwards so that the spotlight was diffused and reflected from the ceiling. Then she picked up her carrier bag and brought it back into the living room. "Put your hands behind your back and don't move them until I tell you," she said. "I'll change in here."

"But in this weather I'll freeze if you leave me on my own," I protested jokingly.

"Nonsense;" she laughed, "who is supposed to be the witch round here?" She took my hand and led me into the bedroom. "It's as warm in here as it is in your car these days," she whispered. "Now hurry up and get ready. I'll be back before you know it. Don't forget - hands behind your back."

I did as I was told. Yes I did, though a week earlier I would have hesitated to take off my clothes and sit naked in an empty room, hands behind my back. Sammie asked me to do it and so I did. I have to say that the anticipation was sufficient stimulus to overcome any inhibitions that I might still have felt.

A moment later the door opened just slightly and Sammie put her head round it. Her eyes sparkled. "I can do music too," she said in a low voice. "Just listen. Don't worry; your mother won't hear it."

A bare arm was very slowly extended from behind the door. She snapped her fingers. There was a light metallic sound like the clash of finger cymbals and then the gentle ululating wail of a reed flute. Somewhere an invisible hand began a slow rhythmic beat upon a tabor. Soft eastern music filled the room and with it came a slight but unmistakable aroma of myrrh. Sammie's arm was raised as she sidled softly into the room, closing the door behind her with her other hand.

The song of a poet would scarcely do justice to her. She was the loveliest thing that I have ever seen. She had loosed her golden hair and let it fall around her face and over her shoulders, framing a face so beautiful that I could hardly look away from her eyes. I could have sworn that she had not worn make up minutes ago, but now a delicate blue eye shadow shaded gradually to dove grey; her eyebrows were darkened and her lashes impossibly long. Her complexion, wind reddened that morning, was a flawless pale bronze; her lips a subtle dark pink. She smiled; a woman's smile, not a girl's. This was not Sammie; this was Semiramis.

Raising both arms over her head she began to sway almost imperceptibly to the music. My eyes were drawn to her long sheer silk gown; opalescent and shimmering as though it had trapped light within its fabric. Plunging from a bow behind her neck, the halter neckline of the gown slid over her breasts and descended between and below them.

As she turned just a little this way and that, first one breast then the other was half revealed in shadowy profile, as though the gossamer material must surely slide away from them, but it did not. Clearly defined through the silk, her nipples somehow yet retained their covering. There was promise, but no more.

The neckline of the dress was cut below her navel. As she moved a little more, the reflected light caught a flash of ruby; the pendant was suspended from its chain, not around her neck but around her waist; its inner fires seemed to be burning once more. The skirt of the dress brushed the floor. As I watched a bare foot emerged beneath the hem and she took a pace towards me.

The music picked up the beat. She began to move in an undulating fashion, stepping first to the left and then to the right, extending her arms alternately as she did so and with the other hand plucking up her skirt to allow her to step to the other side. With each sidestep she raised the skirt a little higher, revealing her ankles, then her calves. With each sidestep she moved an inch towards me.

She was supple as a serpent, forever inclining her upper body in an opposite direction from her legs and completing an S bend with her gracefully waving arms; like grass blowing in a meadow as the wind passes by; like a reed bed stirring in the breeze. Dance would be too active a word to describe her delicate movement, but my blood surged within me and a pulse pounded in my temples in time with the drum. Slowly the music built and built; gradually the tempo increased, the beat became more insistent, the flute more urgent.

Suddenly, as she reached the point where I sat, the music stopped. There was total silence, disturbed only by the sound of my own aroused breathing. Sammie stood totally still; for five eternal seconds not a muscle twitched. Then, she twitched loose the bow behind her neck. As a cascading sitar sounded, the dress slid from her shoulders, mysteriously turning itself inside out as it did so and tumbling softly to her feet, peeling away from her body like the unveiling of a statue.

Praxiteles at the height of his powers, carving a votive figure of Athena, never sculpted so perfect a form as the falling silk disclosed. A radiant goddess stood before me completely naked save for the amulet which smouldered below her waist. The reflected light from the ceiling now changed, turning her bronzed skin to pale alabaster. She stood for a moment on tiptoe like a ballerina, one leg in front of the other, both arms high, lifting and separating her breasts as the wind raising the fronds of a palm tree lifts its fruit. Her head was turned away from me, almost hidden behind her upraised left arm, her eyes closed. Shadows fell across the gentle curve of her belly down to her smoothly shaven mound and on across her thighs.

Then she stepped out of the shimmering folds and gently pushed the gown away with one foot. With both hands she reached behind her back and unhooked the chain. As she did so her body was thrust towards me. The front of her thighs brushed my knees. I stifled a gasp. With her right hand she cast the amulet after the dress and then she moved forward, opened her legs and stood astride my thighs. Placing her hands on my shoulders she sank gently down on to me; easing forward until with an effortless penetration I was inside her and she was seated in my lap, her body close against mine and her legs wrapped around both me and the back of the chair. I could feel her breasts pressed against me; her arms twined around my neck and her lips closed upon mine. Her tongue flicked into my mouth.

Then she drew back her head half an inch and spoke for the first time since she had entered the room. "That was perfect," she said. "Now I'll give you back your hands."

I had driven my nails into my palms in the effort to keep my hands behind the back of the chair as instructed. Now I embraced her. She held me close again. The music began once more; the throbbing of the tabor a complement to the throbbing of my loins.

Though sitting on my thighs, Sammie had perfect control of her abdominal muscles; she seemed able to move to move subtly to the music in the same way that she had swayed across the floor. As before I lost all track of time, almost all sense of myself as a separate creature. I was lost in a well of sensual pleasure so deep that could happily have drowned; I had no sense of the future, no recollection of the past; there was only the moment, nerves twisted and stretched beyond breaking point, reverberating like the notes of the sitar; senses overwhelmed; an impossible, exquisite agony.

Gradually again the music built; the beat quickened; the notes became urgent. It was loud; surely not only Maman but the whole street must hear it. It drove onward; pounding, wailing, demanding movement that, placed as I was, I was powerless to make. A great cry started to well up from inside me, but, before it reached my lips, her arms left my neck and her body leaned away from me until she lay flat, the small of her back against my knees; she threw wide her arms and went on arching until her hair brushed the floor. A perceptible shudder ran through her. For a long moment she hung there without moving. Then she recoiled like a gymnast and twined her arms around me again. Her breasts squeezed against my chest. She gently bit the lobe of my left ear and then whispered into it.

"I saw your school photograph, T.J." she breathed. "You have a second name. Tell me what it is."

I was almost incapable of speech. "You really don’t want to know," I gasped, "It’s a bit embarrassing; you know, old fashioned; I never use it."

She bit my ear just a little harder. "Just like me. You know mine. Tell me what yours is!" she insisted softly.

"Jedidiah," I admitted.

"I knew it," she said.

XXVIII - 09.00 Wednesday 22nd December

"Behold the tears of such as were oppressed and had no comforter,"

On Wednesday morning, Sammie and I borrowed my mother's car and, after dropping Maman at the bank, set off up St Peter's Valley in the direction of the convent. Sammie remarked that she could see where I got my taste in vehicles and I assured her that my mother only ran a Super Snipe because she refused to change a car until it broke down and the Humber never did. I had to admit that the car belied its forty-five years. The paintwork was largely unblemished and the engine ran like any engine that has spent its entire life in a forty mile an hour speed limit.

"She says the car was good enough for Grandpapa Le Tocq and it's good enough for her," I said.

"I can't wait to discover what Grandpapa Le Querce drives," Sammie replied.

"A Ford Fiesta," I admitted prosaically. She evinced considerable disappointment. "But he's rebuilding a Jowett Javelin as a hobby," I added. Sammie smiled, satisfied that the family tradition was being upheld.

At Coin Varin we took the right fork off Le Chemin des Moulins on to La Rue de la Vallée, passing the reservoir on our right and headed for St Mary's, climbing all the way. On the other side of the village, the closer we got to the north coast, the smaller the roads became. In St Mary Nord the single track lanes are bounded by high banks on either side and the contents of the fields are invisible to the occupants of a car.

The driveway to the convent, which stands a few hundred yards from the cliff edge overlooking the sea, was unpaved and so little trafficked that a hump of grass grew all along the middle of the track. From the landward side there was no indication of the nature of the building's occupants other than a small notice at the end of the track nearest the public road. To all appearances it was an ordinary, if large, farmhouse, complete with a front door showing the traditional Jersey nine stone arched construction. The fences around its fields were neat; its animals in good condition; one field already ploughed and harrowed waiting for an early planting of potatoes. In front of the house was a tidy garden, with flower borders around the perimeter and clearly demarcated plots of different herbs in the centre.

As we drew into the yard and stopped, Sammie appeared to be taken aback. "Is this it?" she asked. I was surprised to see a strained look on her face and she held herself rigid and tense as though in the grip of a sudden abdominal pain.

"Yes," I replied, "it's not exactly Canterbury Cathedral is it? The nuns just took over a farmhouse that happened to be for sale when they arrived in the last century. Apart from being much tidier, the place has remained much as it then was. They’ve built a sort of cloister on the seaward side." My guided tour was interrupted when I saw that Sammie was still grimacing and looking at the building as though she was more disgusted than disappointed.

"Are you all right?" I asked. "You don't look too well. Can I get you anything?"

"I'll be all right when I get away from here," she said through gritted teeth. "There's something bad here, really bad."

"It's not the feeling you used to get in the walled garden?" I enquired with concern. "You were sensitive to the fact that the murder had been committed there. "If Victoria was murdered here, you might be picking up the same sort of vibrations, but more powerfully because it was only half as long ago."

"That could be," she nodded painfully. "Whatever it is, I don't much like it."

"We'll go then," I said, reaching for the ignition.

"No!" she protested. "We're obviously in the right place. You go in. I'll take the car to Devil's Hole. I can find it from the map; it's less than a mile. When you've finished here, you can walk down there to meet me."

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" I asked. "You don't need a doctor?"

"I was perfectly all right until we came within a hundred yards of this place," she groaned. "I'll be all right again when I get a little distance away."

"In that case," I said, "I'll turn round and drive part way back to the road. If you feel okay, I'll get out and you can take over from there."

The Snipe was too big to do a three point turn in the farmyard and Sammie sat rocking slightly, arms clasped across her stomach, as I manoeuvred it around. But as she had predicted, a hundred yards up the track her features relaxed and she sighed deeply.

"I'm fine now," she said.

I stopped the car and gave her a worried look. "Are you sure? I was worried back there. Your face went nearly as red as your sweater."

"I'm sorry," she gave me a weak smile. "I must have given you a fright. You were right, I think. Whatever happened to Victoria happened right there, on the very spot where you stopped the car. That's why I felt it so powerfully. I'm quite all right now. You go back and find out what they know and I'll see you down at Devil's Hole."

Recalling my dream, I really didn't want Sammie to go to Devil's Hole alone, but I could hardly explain why to her; the place is visited by thousands of tourists every year. I simply was not sensitive to astral waves and we had just had yet another convincing demonstration of that. I had felt nothing in the farmyard, just as I had felt nothing when I had made deliveries there years ago.

"There's a car park near the Priory at the head of the path down to Devil's Hole," I said. "Don't go down the path on your own. It might be slippery in this weather. Wait for me in the car park and we'll go down together."

"All right!" she said in the patient way that one might humour a querulous child. "Now will you go back to the convent and find out what you can? We'll be here all day at this rate."

I got out and let her change places with me. She wound down the window and waved and then the Snipe's wheels crunched on the loose stones of the rutted drive and she departed in the direction of the road. I watched the car until she was lost to sight behind a bank at a turn in the track. Then I turned and walked the hundred yards back to the convent. As I approached, I tried my best to see it as a place where a foul murder had been done and to open myself to these famous astral waves. For the life of me I could not. It was just an old granite house on top of an older granite headland and, as I'd mentioned before, if you like contemplating the sea, this was a pleasant enough place to do it.

There was a wrought iron knocker on the front door and I rapped it firmly. There were prompt sounds of response from within. A young girl in a white habit came to the door, half opening it to see who was calling, without offering admittance.

"Good morning," I said. "I'm sorry to disturb you. My name is Tobias Le Tocq. I used to supply the convent with hardware six or seven years ago."

She nodded and said nothing.

"I was wondering if there was anyone here who could help me," I went on. "I'm trying to find out what became of a girl called Victoria Delabor; I believe she was admitted here as a novice in 1899. It's a long time ago, but I know how meticulous you are with your records and I thought you might be able to tell me something about her."

"Show Mr. Le Tocq in to my study, Sister Agnes." The quiet voice came from the shadows behind the young novice. I could see nothing though the still partially closed door.

"Yes, Reverend Mother," the girl replied.

The door opened. The novice stood back to allow me to enter and gestured towards an open door on the left hand side at the back of the hallway. I passed through into a shady, wood panelled room with a window overlooking an orchard, its trees leafless in midwinter, which ran downhill towards the cliff edge and the sea beyond. The Mother Superior of the convent sat with her back to the window. Her face was in shadow, but it was clear that she was very old. I had a vague sense of recognition.

"It's good of you to see me, Reverend Mother," I said. "I've a feeling we may have met before."

"You have a good memory, young Tobias," she smiled. "I have not been to your shop in St Helier for a good few years. Not since you sold it, in fact."

I remembered the old nun who had come to the shop several times and who had always called me "young Tobias." She had been old then; she must be ancient now. But she had always seemed a pleasant and natural person. There had been nothing stilted or other-worldly about her.

"I am glad to see you're still keeping well," I said. "I was explaining to the young lady ..... Sister Agnes is it? .....That I was trying to trace what happened ....."

"To Victoria Delabor," she cut short my hesitant explanation. "Yes, young Tobias, I am old, but I still have all my faculties; I am not deaf." I felt embarrassed for no good reason. "You have traced her as far as this. I knew you would."

Now I was baffled as well as hesitant. "I'm sorry .... you knew I would?" I began.

"Of course," the old woman's voice suggested that her face, still hidden in the shadows, was smiling. "I have known you far longer than you think, young Tobias. I knew you were the one who would come here to find Victoria on the eve of the Millennium. From the first moment I met your grandfather, Henri Le Querce, in his prison cell, I knew it. When your mother married your father David I was reminded that another of the chosen was also a son of David."

There was no obvious answer to this unexpected response to my enquiry. I asked if I might sit down and she nodded.

"Let me get this straight," I said. "You knew when I was a child that I would come here looking for Victoria Delabor? I don't understand. No-one could have known that. I took up this case a week ago, just on a whim. I had never heard of Victoria Delabor until last Friday."

The Mother Superior did not answer my question directly. "So how did you come to learn of Victoria on Friday?"

It was not an easy tale to tell without being thought an imbecile, but I tried. Briefly I described my investigation. The Mother Superior's only hint of surprise came when I admitted to receiving messages through a medium who had directed me to look across the sea to find Victoria.

"You say that your medium's messages were lucid but at the same time confused," she said. "This is not surprising. She is acting for a trapped soul who is cut off from salvation and the knowledge that it brings."

I took a deep breath. "I may as well tell you the rest," I said. "You will probably think me a complete lunatic, but a friend of mine and I have both independently met someone called Raphael, who appears to be an ... that is ...a supernatural being. Perhaps we're both mad."

"The Church has a whole legion of saints who have encountered angels," she smiled. "Who am I to scoff? I like to think that I can speak to God and that from time to time God speaks to me. Am I also mad? Tell me about the experiences of yourself and your friend, young Tobias."

After I had described the two meetings with Raphael, she was quiet for a while. "Your friend was right," she said finally. "Like me, she knows you are chosen. You must recall however that Raphael is a teacher, not a warrior. He will give instruction, but you, young Tobias, must be God's instrument."

"Reverend Mother I have no desire to be God's instrument!" I exclaimed. "What I need to do is protect an innocent girl who's in deadly danger!"

"Have you not heard, young Tobias, that many are called but few are chosen? Many identify their own desires with the will of God. Many believe themselves chosen; but we do not choose ourselves, God chooses us. He chooses the obscure more often than the proud." She smiled again. "Tell me what you know of this Victoria," she said.

The old nun had the kind of personality that was at once magnetic and compelling. I explained what I knew of Victoria's history prior to her application to join the community of La Hougue Sainte.

The Mother Superior nodded sadly, but said nothing.

I told her that I had found a book which Victoria had written, from which I had learned details of her family's cult of Baal. At the mention of the book, the old nun's eyes seemed to brighten

"You read this book?" she asked.

"I read most of it. I photographed its pages in difficult circumstances when I found it concealed in Borminster Hall."

She seemed perplexed. "What need was there been to photograph the book? Why did you not simply take it away with you?"

"In the circumstances I couldn't remove the book without giving myself away; the owners might have missed it and realised that they were under investigation."

"The owner," the old woman said wistfully, "may have been capable of better concealment than you think. Perhaps Victoria intended you alone to find it. Tell me what you read."

It had not occurred to me that Victoria's book might have lain undisturbed for a century. I had assumed that, like the doll, it had been concealed by the Delabors. The compartment below the mantelpiece had been hard to detect in the dark, but was probably more obvious in the daylight. In any case the owners of a house must be expected to be familiar with its secret compartments. Nevertheless, I could not deny that I had needed help to find it.

I was not certain how much to say on the subject of witchcraft. My reception had been friendly so far, but I had no idea of what the Mother Superior knew. I did not want her to refuse to have anything further to do with me on the grounds that I was dabbling in the occult. There was a period of silence when I finished describing the book, as though she expected me to say more.

Finally she spoke. "The old have seen much, Shakespeare says. Do you suppose that I am very old, Tobias?"

I floundered a little. The Mother Superior was of advanced years and had taken the veil; she could not be expecting me to compliment her on her youthful appearance.

"I suppose quite old, Mother Superior," I eventually replied

"How old do you suppose I am?" she asked.

I really didn't like to guess and I didn't see the point of this game. However old she was, the Mother Superior could not be old enough to have known Victoria, who had been dead for a century. I managed to say as much. The old woman's eyes seemed to pierce through me, as she sat, still with her back to the window and her face in shadow. At length she spoke again.

"This Victoria was a witch?" she asked. At least I took her interrogative tone of voice to imply a question, though I was unsure whether she was asking about Victoria's status or the extent of my knowledge of it.

"She came from a family that practised witchcraft, but, to judge by her book, she detested it herself. She came to Jersey to escape from it."

The Mother Superior seemed not in the slightest disturbed by this topic. Indeed she prodded me further along the road. "Now think, young Tobias," she said. "Did Victoria detest all magic or just magic's evil manifestations?" When I looked blank she added, "To judge by her book, you said."

"Victoria practised some magic of a defensive kind," I conceded. "She seems to have used a spell to conceal the contents of the book from some readers, though I was able to read it. If Victoria was willing to practise defensive spells then she was not in rebellion against witchcraft as such."

The Mother Superior was silent.

"The foreword to the book warned that it could only be read by its author and him who holds The Key," I tried again. "But I know next to nothing of witchcraft. I don't hold any key and I could read it."

"Victoria found that for those in whose blood the ancient craft runs, it is not possible to escape from it. However deep the seeds are buried, however long they remain dormant in the soil, one day the touch of the sun reawakens them to life. To everything there is a season."

"And a time to every purpose under the heavens," I completed. My new-found knowledge of scripture was becoming a little scary.

"I find," she said, "that one sometimes needs help to remember what one knows. A language for example that one has not spoken in many years may not instantly spring to the lips when needed; a sleeper who is awakened with a start may take some time to understand who and where he is; a key that has not turned in its lock for three thousand years may perhaps be rusty."

I realised that she was speaking in metaphors and leading me to deduce a conclusion for myself. Dormant seeds, dormant linguistic skills, awakening sleepers, then rusty keys. But not just any rusty keys; she had specifically referred to three thousand years. Not "thousands of years" but three thousand years. I knew of only one three thousand year old key.

There were more witches around than I would have thought, but all of the witches that I had encountered in this case knew that they were witches. If the old woman took me for a witch then she was mistaken. I had never worked a spell in my life, had I? Until the past week I didn't even believe in spells, did I? I was not here to talk about myself anyway. I tried to draw what I took to be a rambling conversation back to Victoria.

"Do you know whether Victoria's family followed her here?" I faltered. "My friend, that is to say the girl I came here with, not the other one who saw Raphael, is from the same family. She is sensitive to these things; she said she felt something terrible had happened to Victoria right outside in the yard. It made her feel so ill she had to go away."

"She felt ill, but not because of what happened to Victoria," said the old nun. "No-one followed Victoria to La Hougue Sainte. Of those of witch blood none but one could have done so. Victoria made sure of that, as your friend just discovered."

She was saying that Sammie's pain had been caused by a defensive spell; one that Victoria had set up around the convent a century ago. Somehow I found that hard to accept. And what exactly did she mean by her enigmatic reference to "none but one"? It echoed the foreword to Victoria's book.

"Victoria came to a Christian community and practised witchcraft?" I marvelled.

"The forces of life are one, young Tobias," the old woman replied. "It is a grave error to classify this one as Christian, that one as pagan. If God allows things to be done, then those things must suit his purpose, is that not so?"

I had heard modern theologians arguing the opposite, but now did not seem the moment to engage in a religious disputation. The Mother Superior was still speaking in Delphic riddles and I had to know what she meant.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you," I confessed. "Are you saying Victoria was not murdered?"

"Victoria Delabor was not murdered, young Tobias," she said.

"Then I'm completely wrong about this business," I shook my head in bewilderment. "I was sure there must have been a murder in 1899; if there wasn't I'm almost back where I started."

"Did I say that there was no murder in 1899?" The Mother Superior asked. "What I said was that Victoria Delabor was not murdered."

The table from the Borminster files had had a column headed Victoria. We assumed she had been sacrificed just like the others. On the other hand, if Victoria had survived into the current century, then it was possible that this old woman had known her personally; Victoria had been only nineteen when she came to Jersey.

"Did you perhaps meet her, then?" I asked the old woman. "Did you know Victoria?"

She smiled again, "Victoria became Mother Superior of this community."

"I was so sure that Victoria was the intended victim," I said. "Everything seemed to fit."

"And does the fact that she did not die mean that her death was not intended?" the old nun enquired. "Think now, young Tobias. I have told you that she defended herself; sadly, at that time, she lacked the power to defend others."

It was not easy to accept that another victim could have been substituted. "The message from the medium repeated the name Victoria several times," I said.

The nun’s voice was quiet as she replied. "We have already noted that the messages were confused, have we not? Once again you must think carefully, young Tobias. Did the messages tell you to seek Victoria Delabor?"

"No," I admitted. "But there were only two Victorias in the family. I believed at the time I received the messages that the other one had died in childhood before 1850. Now I’ve changed my mind because there is a man involved in the case who appears to be her descendant. If she had descendants then she must have survived into adulthood ... but that still doesn't mean she was alive in 1899."

The Mother Superior was silent.

"I believe this woman, Victoria Kerr, might have been cheated out of her inheritance by Victoria Delabor's grandfather, Sir Richard," I added.

"If Victoria Kerr survived into adulthood and was cheated as you say, it might have been quite convenient for the Delabors to murder her." The Mother Superior spoke quietly and slowly. "You see, you do know the answer after all, young Tobias. A woman named Victoria was murdered in 1899 as you thought, but not Victoria Delabor. It was not here in Jersey and not in India, where she had spent her life working in domestic service after her family disowned her. She died in France, on her way back to England. She was over sixty years old."

"Reverend Mother ..." I began, "How can you possibly know this?"

"The old have seen much, as I said before," she responded obliquely. "But what I know is less than what you know. I can teach you little, though I can help you to remember."

She paused and then went on to fill in the gaps in the story as I had learned it. Sir Richard Delabor's elder son, Victoria's uncle, had known that his patrimony had been stolen from his great aunt. When Victoria Delabor, his niece, had fled from him to Jersey, he had already made contingency arrangements to find an alternative victim. He had written to Victoria Kerr in India, offering to settle part of the estate upon her and her children. She was by this time a widow and very poor. Her one son had died, along with his wife, in a fever epidemic.

Victoria had been left to care for two young grandchildren and to press their claim she had reverted to her maiden name and added to it her mother's maiden name of Rigg. When she received the letter, she believed that at last she would receive fair treatment, so she had come willingly.

"The victim came willingly to Baal," I said. "She had been married to a non-witch."

"And she died on the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve," completed the old woman.

Victoria Kerr, she said, had taken passage on the first ship she could find, which happened to be a French steamer en-route to St. Malo. Whilst she was waiting there for transport to England, she was murdered. But when Victoria went to meet her killers she left the children in her lodgings. After their grandmother's failure to return, the orphans were brought up by a Breton family and of course, since they had no way of proving their identity, they were unable to pursue their grandmother's claim.

"The children settled in Brittany?" I asked, perceiving a chink of light.

"The girl married a Breton farmer; the boy lived in Brittany for a number of years, then he moved to England. They both raised families of their own, but their families kept in close touch with each other."

As the old woman spoke, I began to see the outline of an elaborate plot that the Kerr-Riggs had mounted to avenge their ancestral grudge and to fulfil what they saw as the destiny of their family at the same time.

"Elaine, Michael Delabor's first wife," I suggested, "She was a Breton. That's too much of a coincidence. She must have been a descendant of Victoria Kerr's granddaughter."

She had picked out Michael; snaring him by witchcraft, with the aid of her photographer cousin Harry from the English branch of the family; Harry who visited France so often that he was on first name terms with leading wine growers and who was at the same time establishing a relationship of his own with one of the Delabor family's two daughters. I deduced that the two of them had planned to turn the millennial ritual to their own account, but something had gone wrong. Had Elaine been discovered? Was her death really an accident? Had Orson found Nadia as a replacement?

This speculation still did not explain to me why the Mother Superior was so well informed. "You knew all along that I would look for Victoria Delabor and yet you knew that Victoria Kerr was the one who was murdered," I said with dawning realisation. "Did you arrange for me to find you?"

"That was not necessary, young Tobias," the aged nun shook her head. "The main strands of our fates are predetermined."

"You are not exactly the Mother Superior I expected to find here, Reverend Mother," I said honestly.

"Perhaps," she said softly. "Perhaps not. How old did you say you thought I was, young Tobias?"

The answer seemed as obvious and as crazy, as everything else in this case. "One hundred and nineteen, Reverend Mother," I replied.

"They do say, do they not, that some of witch blood can live to very great ages? Others are born and re-born, living many lives, until their hour comes."

"Was it you who brought my boat to Jersey the night before last?" I asked her.

"She tried to stop you," the old woman replied. "But your time is not yet. You must not waste strength that you will need later. I am old, but I have been left some little power; I was bidden to use it. You also, young Tobias, know what you know. Use the wisdom God has given you."

"Reverend Mother," I said. "I don't feel wise; in fact I feel completely out of my depth. What is it that I am supposed to do?"

"Have courage," she said. "You will stand again in the open before the evil and outface it. But first, just as before, the false prophets shall contend amongst themselves. At the end," she prophesied, "only the red witch shall stand and shall summon Baal. Do not reveal yourself until he appears."

This was my third warning against the red witch. The automatic writings, the demon in my dream and now the old nun all warned me to expect the triumph of the red witch. Yet I knew Charlotte well; better than I should have done some might say. She seemed to me to play with magic; she was concerned with sex, comfortable living and more sex. I still could hardly believe what I was repeatedly told.

"She conceals her evil in beauty," said the Mother Superior. "Remember the text, 'Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord God looketh on the heart.' You must see her for what she is. Remember, bide your time, young Tobias. Do not return to Borminster until the ritual, no matter what the emergency may seem to be. Her time is first, but it is brief. Leave me now. I am old and I am tired. But I have lived to tell you what you needed to know from me. That was my purpose and it is accomplished."

"Reverend Mother," I asked desperately, "who is it that you think I am?"

"You are who you are," she repeated simply.

She rose from her chair and lifted her hand towards me. A blessing? A witch's charm? I couldn't tell and I was no longer sure of the difference. As she stepped from behind the desk, the winter sunlight fell upon her face for the first time. She looked no older than when I had last seen her in the shop and I remembered her features quite well, but as she stood and smiled her aged smile, it seemed to me as clear as it had when I had changed the hairstyle of Hester Rigg's picture on the computer. Behind the wrinkles and the white hair which strayed from under her starched wimple, I saw a face I recognised.

It was how Sammie would look in old age.

XXIX - 11.00 Wednesday 22nd December

"Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it."

I walked the cliff path to Devil's Hole and found the big, black Humber the only occupant of the car park above the Priory. The car was empty and its driver was nowhere to be seen. I was at once both irritated and irrationally concerned for Sammie’s safety. There were no tourists here now; the weather was cold. The restaurant was closed and the tables that sit outside it during the summer were gone.

I started down the paved track that leads between a row of private houses and the muddy pond with its absurd twice life size black-painted statue of Satan. Sammie was not beside the pond and I hurried on along the path, past the so-called viewpoint where you can actually see nothing in summer because of the overgrowth of bracken and other vegetation. I jogged down the steepest section, where the path has a gradient of one in two or three, before it skirts the higher north side of Devil's Hole, reaches the cliff edge and turns back on itself to descend to the concrete parapet of the viewing platform on the lip of the lower south side.

As the platform came into view, I could see that Sammie was not on it. My concern increased and I hurried on to peer over the edge into the hole. The tide was receding and although water lapped around the floor of the basin, there was no surge of surf. Neither was there any sign of Sammie. The rocks below were wet and slippery, but if she had fallen, I would have been able to see her. She must have scrambled down successfully and gone inside the cave.

I called her name at the top of my voice, "Sammie, Sammie! Are you there?"

The only answer was the raucous screeching of a group of roosting gulls that my shouting had disturbed from their rocky perches. They swirled around in the air above the hole and screamed their annoyance.

Beyond the parapet there are three steps left of the old flight of stairs that was washed away years ago and the twisted remnants of the iron handrail. After that it is a case of trying not to break your neck or your legs and periodically the local newspaper carries the tale of some fool who decides to take a closer look than is safe and fails to negotiate the descent intact.

On this occasion at least it was not to be me; I half climbed half slid down the track that I had last used as a teenager for a dare and made my way around the lazily slopping water to peer through the tunnel at the open sea beyond. It was darker inside than I remembered. I thought I saw a movement on a ledge of rock. I hardly knew whether to be more fearful that Sammie might have come to some harm or that I risked interrupting a spell.

"Sammie!" My voice echoed around in the cavern and came back to me. There was no other reply. I was sure she was there. I slipped into a shallow rock pool as I made my way into the gloom; icy cold water flooded my shoe and made me shudder. The tunnel seemed long; I remembered it being very short, no more than a few dozen yards; now it seemed to stretch away into the distance as though I were looking through the wrong end of a telescope and I still could not see Sammie in the darkness.

Both my feet were now wet and my shoes slipped on the rocks. There was a clamminess and chill in the cave; a tomb-like cold in the air to add to the frigidity of the water. The walls were slimy to the touch and I was sure that every time I stretched out my freezing hand to steady my uneven progress it was likely to encounter something revolting.

"Sammie, are you here?" Still no reply. I was half way into the tunnel, I would have thought, though my eyes were somehow deceiving me as to the distance I still had to travel. Perhaps she was not there after all. A gull flew into the mouth of the cave behind me and screeched. In the confined space the sound was like the bats of hell and I turned to look where the noise had come from.

The entrance was not just a few yards behind me, as I had thought, but a great distance; it might have been half a mile. And there was not one entrance, but two. The tunnel seemed to divide and run along two channels, though I knew for a fact that there was only one and a short one at that. I looked back towards the sea and now I could not tell which way the sea was, because the tunnel in that direction divided into three and each branch stretched away into the far distance. I blinked and looked back behind me again. Five tunnels ran away in that direction and each of them so long that from my perspective the entrances seemed no larger than a small coin.

I leaned my back against the wall of the cave, ignoring the cold wet algae that coated it and stared at the opposite wall. Had Sammie been and gone? Had she set up her defensive spell in the cave, to help her in some way in her endeavour to resist Charlotte and had I, unknowing, walked right into it? Was I caught in a trap designed for Baal?

I looked to my left and saw ten tunnels where one should have run towards the sea. To my right an even greater number ran towards Devil's Hole. At least I supposed that was their general direction; in fact forward and back were fast becoming indistinct concepts. I saw myself at the centre of a circle of myriad tunnels, each radiating from the point where I stood like the spokes of a wheel. And now, to add to my hallucinations, I began to hear Sammie's voice.

From one of the tunnels she called, "Here I am; this way."

I looked towards what I thought was the right tunnel and at once her voice came again, this time from behind me, "Here I am; this way." As I turned, her voice came again and again, first from this side, then from that. I would start towards one opening, only to be recalled immediately to another, until I stopped and stood still out of sheer perplexity. I was in a maze and I wasn't sure which way would lead me back to the outside world.

Maybe they all did? It wouldn't really matter if I emerged on the seaward or the landward side of the cave; I would have to climb to regain dry land in either case. I was inclined now to think that Sammie was not here and that the sound of her voice was an illusion designed as part of the spell. I had somehow missed her on the pathway down. Maybe she had taken the little side path to the viewpoint half way down the hill? If I could only get out of the cave, I would find her back at the car park waiting for me and anxious because I was not appearing within a reasonable time.

I tried to remember which way I had come and set off in that direction. After I had squelched along in the icy water for several minutes, I saw the light at the end of the tunnel go out. There was a rock wall a yard in front of my nose and a ghoulish laughter reverberated around the cave. That didn't sound like Sammie; it sounded more like the cry of the seabird in the cave entrance, magnified a hundred times. I turned and made my way back to the hub of the wheel. Again the tunnels radiated in every direction, including the one from which I had just emerged, where now the phantom exit was visible again in the distance.

I selected the diametrically opposed tunnel and set off along that one, hoping to emerge on the shoreline. After a few minutes the same experience was repeated. The aperture vanished and in its place I felt a blank wall of rock.

The manic laughter rang out again. I confess to being more than a trifle rattled. I thumped the heel of my fist against the slimy wall that barred my path and turned again to retrace my steps to the central chamber. This time it took longer to get back there than it had done to come this far and each of the next five times when I chose similar dummy tunnels the return time seemed to increase. Each time the inane laughter followed my increasingly frustrated efforts and continually on the outward journey I heard Sammie's voice, either behind or in front, like a will o' the wisp in the marshland, "Here I am; this way."

How long I was lost in this state I cannot say, but I became increasingly conscious that it must have been a long time, because the water had stopped ebbing away and was now swishing strongly around my feet as I stumbled back and forth. After a while it was up to my calves and then my knees. I tried another tunnel and another. The laughter echoed and re-echoed around me, until it seemed continuous. A strong surge knocked me off balance and I was soaked to my waist before I could recover myself. The inundation left me desperately cold and my teeth began chattering. I was not far from panicking. I had no idea which was the tunnel by which I had entered, or which one led to the sea. I knew if I did not find the way out quickly I would drown. Whether it was possible for Sammie's spell to drown Baal I couldn't say, but it was certainly possible that she would accidentally drown me.

When I re-entered the chamber at the hub, wading through water which rose half way up my thighs as it surged, I knew that I had no more scope for trial and error. It must be taking half an hour now to explore each tunnel and in another half hour I would be swimming within a few feet of the roof of the cave, or having the surge crack my skull against some outcropping of the roof. The next tunnel had to be the right one.

A hundred apertures surrounded me, each one to all appearances the same as its neighbour on each side; a hundred distant entrances; small points of light, only two of which were real. Were the others phantasms which had been conjured into existence by the spell? Were they only in my mind? How could the real tunnels be identified when every one looked the same? Since my eyes could tell me nothing useful, I closed them and stood as steadily as I could in the midst of the swirling water, breathing deeply and trying to apply logic to my situation. "Look within yourself," Victoria had said. Well, I needed to find the answer within myself and I needed to find it quickly.

As I stood, the water rushed against the side of my right leg. Push, push, push; from the right and a little to the rear; a breeze blew against my cheek from the same direction; the incoming tide; the onshore wind accompanying it. Keeping my eyes closed, I turned until I felt the push of the tide from directly behind me and the breeze on the back of my neck.

"God, let this be the right way," I prayed.

Still with my eyes shut and my hands extended in front of me like a blind man, I stumbled forward. Twice I tripped and fell forward face down into the water, grazing my hands and knees on the rocky floor; the second time I got a mouthful of salt water and surfaced half choked. Each time I got up slowly, making a desperate effort not to open my eyes, re-orientated myself by the tide and the wind and waded forward again. I was conscious of a lightening in front of my closed eyelids, but I dared not risk a peep to see if the entrance to the cave was in front of me. I went on and on. The water rose and rose. When the lightness outside my eyelids had become quite strong, I heard a voice I knew calling from somewhere high above my head and to the right. It was not Sammie's voice.

"Toby? Is that you?"

In spite of myself I opened my eyes and looked up. I found I had waded almost to the centre of the pool in the basin of Devil's Hole. To my inestimable relief the open sky was above my head. But to my utter astonishment, leaning over the parapet of the observation platform and looking down at me with an expression of bewilderment on her face was Charlotte Kerridge.

"It is you, Toby," she repeated, more confidently this time. "What on earth are you doing? Do you normally go swimming fully clothed and in the middle of winter?"

I waded to the edge and scrambled out, just as a large wave surged through the cave and flung a fistful of surf up against the ledge where Baal had stood in my dream. Water streamed from my sodden trousers and my good walking shoes squelched and slipped on the rocks and turf as I scrambled up to the parapet. I finally clambered over the gate and stood there in front of her, dripping wet and shaking with cold. Her look of amazement turned to one of concern.

"Toby, whatever has happened to you?" she exclaimed. "You'll catch your death. We have to get you back up the hill. I have some dry clothes in the hire car; they're mine, but I think they'd be an improvement on your present state, don't you?"

"Charlotte, what are you doing here?" I managed to force out, between chattering teeth.

"I came to see you of course! Your office was kind enough to tell me where you were."

Doreen had been instructed to reveal my whereabouts should Charlotte or Orson get in touch.

"I flew down this morning," Charlotte continued. Remembering Sammie's conviction that the gull on the foredeck had been Charlotte, I was spooked by her choice of words, despite my enfeebled state. "It was quite easy to get a seat at short notice," she went on. "I was surprised really, considering the time of year. Here, let me put my coat round you; you'll freeze before we get you to the car. Is there anyone with you?"

"Is my car still in the car park?" I enquired. "A 1950's Humber Super Snipe?"

"What sort of an answer is that?" she demanded. "No, since you ask, the car park was empty when I arrived. I thought I must have missed you, but since I was here I decided to walk down and look at Devil's Hole anyway. Lucky for you I did. Has your car been stolen? Did somebody attack you and knock you into the water?"

"No, nobody attacked me," I said. "How did you know I was here?"

"I spoke to your mother at the bank," she replied. "Wasn't that a lucky coincidence? I had to draw out some money when I arrived and I saw this lady with the nameplate 'Mrs Le Tocq.' So I thought, 'It's a small island; there can't be too many Le Tocqs; she might be able to help me find you. And, lo and behold, she turns out to be your mother."

'Coincidence my foot!' I thought as I tried to stop my teeth from chattering.

"Anyway," Charlotte went on, "she said that you and your girlfriend had gone up to Devil's Hole, so I came up to see if I could find you; that's why I asked if there was anyone with you. You are a sly rogue, Toby. Where is she then, this Jersey Lily?"

I was once again impressed by my mother's powers of diplomacy. Not knowing Charlotte, she had evidently concealed from her that her niece was on the island and given the impression that I was out with a local girl. Mother had also known that the convent was part of my investigation, whilst Devil's Hole was supposed to be just sightseeing and had steered Charlotte towards the safer option.

"If my car is missing," I said, "then I am afraid that she has probably gone off with it. We had what you might call a disagreement. I think she suspected I might have been seeing someone recently in England."

"Smart girl," replied Charlotte. "That doesn't quite explain why when I arrive she's completely disappeared and you are wading around a dangerous tidal pool like a sleepwalker with all your clothes on!"

"I fell over the edge during our discussion," I lied. "I think I must have bumped my head and been out cold for a while. When I woke up the tide was coming in."

"And she left you there in that state?" Charlotte's voice was full of solicitude. "For crying out loud, you could have been injured or dead! What sort of women do you associate with Toby?"

"I think you should answer that," I managed a rictus grin.

"You should report this to the police..." She hesitated and then said, "Well, on second thoughts maybe you shouldn't speak to the police at this precise moment in time. I came here to discuss a business proposition with you; one that it might be better if the police weren't aware of. I'm sure you'll be interested; but that can wait. Right now we're going to get you to the car and into some dry clothes before you die on me!"

I allowed Charlotte to propel my faltering steps up the steep path back to the car park. She held her coat around me, with her left hand gripping both sides of its front and her right arm supportively around my back. The coat was Dior and it was going to be ruined by the water, but Charlotte didn't seem to care. I was glad of the extra covering, because the wind that had saved my life was now cutting through my sodden clothing like a knife and threatening to undo the earlier good that it had done by giving me pneumonia.

As we walked, Charlotte told me that she had taken me for a man with better taste. "You clearly need to be taken firmly in hand," she said, "and not allowed to run around with unreliable floozies who are capable of violent behaviour and car theft. You also clearly need a drink." Fortunately, she added, she had taken the opportunity to acquire some VAT-free liquor on her way to the bank and that was in the car too.

By the time that we reached the car park, I had decided that I was possibly not going to die after all. My circulation had been restored by the climb and though I was still shivering, the spasms were controllable.

"Is it your first time in Jersey?" I asked, in what might in other circumstances have passed for a conversational tone.

"It is, as a matter of fact," she replied. "How did you know?"

"Most people hiring a car here for the second time," I said, "settle for a small one. How ever did you get this brute up here?" I looked with mixed feelings at the huge red Maserati in its solitary splendour, about as utterly out of place as it was possible for a car to be in the shingle car park surrounded by scrub and bushes. The red witch was living up to her sobriquet, but for the moment I felt in no danger from her and still mightily relieved at being free of the unintended danger that I had escaped.

I had to assume that Sammie had somehow, with her finely tuned senses for the arrival of another witch, become aware of Charlotte's approach and made herself scarce. There was no other explanation for the absence of the Snipe; no-one on Jersey would have been stupid enough to steal an obviously unique vehicle. Sammie would perhaps be watching from a safe distance, or perhaps she would have assumed I could look after myself and returned to St Helier. If, as I suspected, she was close by, whatever would she make of my half drowned state and Charlotte's solicitude? I would have a great deal of explaining to do.

There were things that needed explaining to me too. As a result of my meeting with Judith Silver, I could guess what Charlotte's business proposition would turn out to be, but the fact that she and not Orson, had turned up to make it, did not fit with the cutting of Sea Witch's cable. How could Charlotte have wanted me dead on Monday night and have a smuggling job for me on Wednesday? So far as I could tell, Charlotte's attitude towards me was unchanged from the good relations which we had enjoyed when we had parted on Saturday afternoon. There was neither any indication of jealously for Sammie nor any sign that she had expected to find her with me.

At least superficially she appeared to believe my mother's story that I was out with a local girl and she seemed to hold no animosity about that. She liked men; I liked women. Sex was just sex. If dissembling were another skill required by witches, then Charlotte might be a mistress of the craft, but it seemed equally possible that she no longer saw me as a potential obstacle but as a combination of sexual amusement and criminal accomplice.

If so, then who had set us adrift? Was Nadia a possibility? Or could it have been a warlock?

I was sadly no expert at gull-sexing, but the thought of Michael Delabor or Chief Constable Gough going around as a bird was so ludicrous that I choked and spluttered in an attempt not to laugh. I was probably on the edge of hysteria after the frightening experience in the cave. Charlotte was instantly all maternal concern.

"Get in the car," she instructed. "My bags are in the back. I'll get you some dry things."

"I'm soaking wet," I pointed out. "This has leather seats. I'll ruin it, just like your coat."

"I can buy a new coat and I can buy the hire firm new seats," she insisted, "Or I can buy the whole damn car if I have to. Now will you get in?"

There is no arguing with a determined witch and in spite of myself I was enjoying being fussed over by Charlotte. She was as gorgeous as ever; her auburn hair ruffled by the wind, but otherwise as immaculate as if she had just stepped out of a stateroom at the Grande Hotel, rather than trudging half a mile up a steep track with a dripping survivor of near-drowning. I remembered that Orson had walked straight into his library from a plane journey looking as though he had just been dressed by his valet. There were evidently advantages to witchcraft if one needed to appear presentable at all times.

Charlotte’s green Jersey wool dress had a high neckline and long sleeves, very suitable for outdoor wear in this weather and her earrings were studs rather than the pendants that she had favoured at home. An elegant diamond brooch in the shape of a bird with spread wings was pinned over her left breast and she wore a necklace in a matching design. On her it looked appropriate, rather than excessive, to be wearing such jewellery during the day and in a remote part of a small island. On the other hand I had developed a bit of a thing about birds. She unlocked the boot and rummaged around in a suitcase.

"Will you manage to get into a pair of my briefs?" she asked as she handed me a towel,"I know how men hate wearing trousers without underwear."

Within a minute or two I was dry and comfortably, if tightly, clothed, albeit with bare feet and three inches of bare shin below Charlotte’s jeans. I would not have cared to walk into a public place but it sufficed for a car journey of a few miles. Charlotte did not look away whilst I changed, but neither did she do anything more than hand me the clothes as I required them. When I was done, she produced a bottle of scotch and opened it.

"I won't have any myself; I'm driving and as you said this brute is proving a bit cumbersome up here. I believe I mentioned that I don't need any attention from the police right now."

In the circumstances I felt no compunction about drinking alone. When I had downed a good stiff one and started on a second, Charlotte enquired where I wanted to go. "You'd better give me directions," she said. "I took half a dozen wrong turns coming up here; I think I've been all over the island. And this car is so long and the junctions are so awkward, you have to stick the bonnet half way across the road before you can see if there's anything coming."

"You should have flown up," I said, exhibiting the inhibition-loosening effect of alcohol on an empty stomach.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Nothing," I replied. "Just go straight down La Grande Rue in front of you towards St. Mary's village."

"La Grande Rue?" Charlotte remarked, looking at the narrow lane,"Is that a local idea of a joke?"

Just in case Sammie had parked the Humber somewhere on the road by which we had come whilst she kept an eye on what was going on, I directed Charlotte by an alternative road to St Helier, east to St John's and down La Rue de La Mare Bellam towards Carrefour Selous. We saw no sign of Sammie and I decided she must have headed for St Helier after all. By the time we reached La Grande Route de St Laurent, Charlotte deemed it appropriate to broach the subject of a small number of packages that she would like taken to Poole.

"You told me you'd had some practice," she said, with perhaps just a hint of uncertainty in her voice. "I wouldn't normally have imposed in this way upon such a brief acquaintance, but it is something of an emergency."

"The stuff's red hot," I suggested.

"Well, let's say it's a little warm," she replied. "It seemed to suffer a bit of spontaneous combustion a couple of days ago, which was rather unexpected. Harry was going to send one of his friends over to see you, but I persuaded him that there was no way you'd do it unless you spoke to someone you knew and trusted. He couldn't come himself, you see; he thinks he's being watched fairly closely."

I could well imagine that Harry Kerridge would not fancy this particular time for an embarrassing brush with the authorities, but for Judith Silver's purposes it was important that he should be caught in the act.

"What's the deal?" I asked, endeavouring to resume my smuggling persona despite residual shivering. "I told you, I have expenses doing this sort of thing. Rush jobs come extra, I'm afraid."

"Ten thousand for yourself; two now; eight after successful delivery," Charlotte said without preamble. "Plus any reasonable presents that you need for your friends in Customs."

"Fifteen thousand," I replied. "Three now; twelve on delivery. And Harry makes the final payment himself. It's not that I don't trust him, you understand, but I feel safer if my principal is running the same risk I am."

Charlotte hesitated. "I'm not sure how easily Harry can lose the Customs spies; I'll come myself if you like."

Her offer was clearly good enough for the average reasonable man; she was setting up the deal herself and offering to see it through herself. I had to find grounds for objection where there were none.

"I'm sorry, Charlotte," I said, "but funnily enough I have known men who'd sell out their wives to save themselves. Now I'm quite sure there's no danger of that here, but I have always had very firm rules about new clients and I won't make any exceptions; that's how I stay out of gaol. There won't be any slip-ups at my end, provided I pay off my people. If your end is secure too, my meeting with Harry will just be a quick formality and we can all go our separate ways."

"I'm not sure I want you to go your separate way, Toby," she smiled, half turning her attention from the road and then snapping it back sharply as a bus approached in the opposite direction.

"I meant Harry and I could part friends," I replied. "He doesn't suspect anything about us, I hope?"

"Do you take me for a fool?" she asked.

That was, I had to agree, the last thing for which anyone would take Charlotte, unless they were looking for a serious misadventure. I wondered whether her story of how she had persuaded her husband that she should come to Jersey herself was true; but that was her business and if it had involved some fancy witchcraft she wasn't likely to tell me.

"Twelve thousand;" she said, "three thousand down. That's all the cash I have. You can ask your mother; she paid it out to me this morning."

"Twelve and a half," I said, "And I'll take the three down."

"Done," she replied.

"Charlotte," I smiled, as urbanely as a man can smile at a woman when he's wearing her clothes, "I love doing business with you … and that's not all I love doing with you." She gave a throaty chuckle. "Now, what are the arrangements for collecting the stuff?"

She told me she'd contact me again when the packages were ready. "I wasn't certain you'd do it so it wasn't possible to finalise the details. I hoped you would though," she smiled. "We've been getting on so well together, after all. I might have been willing to offer certain additional inducements." She flashed me a quick look, the meaning of which was unmistakable. "But since you've been so accommodating, I'll just have to – what shall we say? – roll them up with the package and call them fringe benefits."

"I am all in favour of fringe benefits," I replied, reminding myself once again which side I was on, "but maybe I need a shower and a change of clothes first. Now, how will you get your packages on to the island?"

"We won't," she smiled again. We'll arrange a rendezvous at sea for you to pick them up and take them to England."

"I like it," I said appreciatively. "This sounds like a professional outfit I'm joining. May this be the start of a long and profitable relationship."

"I'll drink to that," said Charlotte, "but not until I get you home!"

XXX - 15.00 Wednesday 22nd December

"I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had withdrawn and was gone."

Sammie was gone. I could hardly believe that she would leave so suddenly and without trying to speak to me first, but she was gone nevertheless. The Humber was back in my mother's garage but Sammie's bags were gone and a note left in our bedroom, (at least she had confidence that Charlotte would not be in there,) indicated that she was taking a standby seat on the first plane out of St Peter's. It read:

"*My Dearest Toby,*

I hope you will forgive this hasty departure, but I simply could not risk Charlotte finding me here. It would ruin everything and I'm not ready yet. I will phone you this evening to talk about things in general and what you found out today in particular.

You'll be wondering how come you didn't find me at Devil's Hole. I had got tired of waiting in the car park and so I went down the path on my own; please don't be cross. I had to climb over the parapet on each side to do my work, so I was out of sight of the path for some time but I was sure you hadn't come by. So I came back up to the car and waited for a long time. You still weren't there but all of a sudden I could sense Charlotte close by; you could have knocked me down with a feather from the wing of one *of her miserable bird impressions. I barely managed to get the car away and round the corner before she arrived and she set off down the track too. So of course I followed her, at a safe distance, to see what she was up to.*

When I saw you climbing out of Devil's Hole, I couldn't believe it. I hadn't seen you go down the path; I thought you were still at the convent. I am desperately sorry that you got into such a state, because I suppose you must have been looking for me. I was worried sick when I saw you, but Charlotte could easily have done you harm then and she didn't seem to want to, so I figured you were probably safe for the time being. Maybe she's changed her mind about you for some reason; I do hope so for your sake.

I can't imagine what Charlotte wants here - or maybe I can, but I didn't think she'd be that brazen. See you don't give it to her! I'm going back to Cambridge and then on to Borminster for the family Christmas. I'll be quite safe there for a week, so don't worry. Enjoy Christmas with your family too. I'll speak to you tonight.

Love, Sammie."

I read the note twice and then stretched out on the bed to try to rest and to think. Charlotte had expected an invitation to come up and wait whilst I changed out of her clothes, but I had put her off. I said that my mother might be home and I did not fancy explaining how come I had gone out with one woman and returned with another and worse how I came to be wearing the second woman's clothes. Of course my real fear had been that Sammie would be in the flat. It seemed I need not have worried.

Charlotte was ready to accept that my drenching in Devil's Hole had cooled my ardour for the time being and that a period of recovery would be needed.

The concession which she had extracted in return was a promise to dine with her, at, of course, The Grande Hotel. This might have been embarrassing had Sammie stayed, but now it should not present a problem unless the phone call that Sammie had promised should come whilst I was out, in which case my mother's diplomacy would have to be called into play again.

After a few minutes' rest I showered and changed, applied some antiseptic to the grazes on my hands and knees, put Charlotte's clothes in the washing machine and tried to figure out what to do next. The bedroom still seemed to resonate with the echoes of Sammie's dance; my heart ached at the separation. Victoria had said I must not go to Borminster before New Year's Eve; wise advice, though now easier said than done.

If Sammie was determined to protect her weaker relatives by appearing not to resist until the last minute then my only opportunity to be of genuine help to her would be during the ritual itself. It could only complicate matters if I arrived early, with nothing to do except provide a target for whoever had hired the fake policemen; indeed in the worst case scenario I should find myself eliminated from the contest before I ever got a chance to help Sammie escape. All the same, in Lincoln I would be with her. I hated to think of her being there alone, although to be honest I was probably thinking more of myself; I knew I was going to miss her badly. I thought she was probably right about there being no real danger to her before the Millennium.

It took a lot of advice from Marlowe before I accepted the logic of staying put. As far as the various threats to Sammie were concerned, by remaining in Jersey I reckoned I should be able to eliminate at least one before the main bout of the evening took place. With the assistance of Judith Silver I could probably take out Harry Kerridge.

That would still leave a more than adequate supply of enemies for Sammie, but it would improve the odds. By how much, I could not be sure. Judith had been persuasive on the importance of Harry; Sammie had been angrily insistent that Charlotte was her main opponent.

I found it harder than ever to accept that Charlotte was evil, as distinct from a crook and a terrible substitute parent. Her prompt attention had just made a significant contribution to saving my life. As Sammie's letter had noted, at Devil's Hole I had been a sitting duck with its eyes shut and it would hardly have taken witchcraft to finish me off. Not only had Charlotte appeared solicitous for my immediate welfare, but she had hoped our relationship could continue. Given that she must expect to be even more powerful soon, I supposed I should be flattered; something still wanted by the woman who has everything. Now Marlowe will tell you all about black widows and other such like females who lure their mates to destruction. All I could say was that if Charlotte were truly doing a Mata Hari on me then she deserved an Academy Award. If she had trapped me, it made very little sense to then extract me. If she and Harry needed my urgent assistance in smuggling it was not in either's interest to drown me first.

Then there was Sammie's letter saying that she had 'done her work'. Had she or had she not set up a defensive spell at Devil's Hole? The letter said that she was sorry I had got into such a state looking for her, but there was no suggestion that I might have fallen foul of her spell. Surely if she had thought that such a thing had happened she would at least have mentioned it? Much more likely, she would have stayed to ensure I suffered no lasting effects. I couldn't believe that her concern for me would not, in such a case, have conquered her fear of Charlotte.

I could have described to her my experience in the cave and she could perhaps have closed, for Baal's benefit, the loophole that had allowed me to escape. The clear implication was that Sammie's "work", whatever it was, had not been anything that she thought could have rebounded on me.

But if Sammie had not been responsible for my traumatic experience, then who had? Michael and Nadia were in Lincoln. Mother Victoria was on my side. Was it possible that the whole experience was somehow brought about by Baal himself? I had dreamed of his presence at Devil's Hole and in my dream he had prophesied that he should be free, but he was not yet free and from The Void he would surely not have been able to exercise such power. In short I was baffled. Just how many enemies did Sammie and I have? Was there another one yet to be encountered?

When the pieces of the puzzle do not fit, no matter how you arrange them, you don't have all the pieces. I had fitted together a lot during my talk with Victoria, but I had enjoyed little leisure to contemplate the implications of her resemblance to Sammie and to Hester. It was clearly beyond coincidence that three intended sacrificial victims should be so similar in appearance, even though in the end Victoria had not been sacrificed and her namesake had died in her stead. As far as the world was concerned, the cloning era was only three or four years old and limited to animals, though fiction writers had addressed the concept decades earlier. Had witchcraft possessed the secret for hundreds of years?

I finally decided that there was no point in puzzling over my brush with death at Devil’s Hole until I could talk to Sammie on the telephone. Meanwhile I had other business. I made a quick telephone call to Swanson's to check whether Judith Silver was still in residence. She was and after a short delay I was put through to her room.

"You caught me in the shower," she said, "I thought it might be you, so I grabbed a towel and made a dive for the phone. My afternoon tea had just arrived; I thought the room service waiter was going to have a heart attack!"

"I'd love to come round for tea, if you promise to stay just as you are," I suggested.

"Sorry," she said, "I hate cold tea and I know you, you'd get biscuit crumbs inside my towel. What can I do for you, short of that?"

I wasn't absolutely sure that it was safe to go into detail on an insecure line. The last thing I needed was for an overly inquisitive hotel switchboard operator to gather information that might somehow get back to the Kerridges or their friends. But I was no expert in talking in code, even if Judith was. Our subsequent conversation would have had them rolling in the aisles in a B movie audience.

"I've been contacted about those packages we discussed," I said. "The shipping agent's wife is in town, did you expect her?"

"The lady does get around, doesn't she?" came the reply. "Can you handle everything?" Following so quickly on the mental picture of a half-naked secret agent confronting the waiter, her choice of phrase almost made me choke. My bruises hurt. Realising that I was temporarily lost for words Judith tried again. "Let me rephrase the question. Are you in a position to transport the merchandise?"

"I've been told to expect instructions to intercept it *en voyage*," I replied. "I've no more details as yet. Apparently the weather in Belgium is very warm; the goods are being moved to France to prevent them being damaged by the heat."

"That's wise," said Judith. "I'll keep an eye on their progress. Let me know when you're leaving, will you? I'll pass the word to the customer. By the way," she continued, "the snaps we sent off have been developed."

I realised she was referring to the ikon from the safe at Borminster Hall. "Any good?" I asked.

"Very good indeed," she said. "The Russian gentleman is famous. He'll pay a lot for the negative." I supposed that Judith was telling me that the ikon had been illegally exported and that the rightful owners were offering a reward for its return.

"That's in a safe place," I replied.

"So you said," Judith acknowledged. "We can collect it after the party."

"That depends on the size of our hangovers, doesn't it?" I queried.

"Don't worry," she reassured me, "we'll still be standing."

"I'll be in touch," I said and then, as an afterthought, "Don't let your tea get cold."

I pushed the off button on the phone and took a deep breath. I needed practice at this spy stuff. A private detective spends most of his time working alone and I usually managed to talk to Doreen or Fred when I needed them without the requirement for verbal gymnastics.

I had two hours before I had arranged to meet Charlotte. She had told me that she would be leaving the next day, in order to get back to Lincoln for the Christmas gathering of the family. Borminster Hall had already opened up half a dozen rooms that had been unused for ages and Mr and Mrs Perkins had been loaned to the Delabors to assist their Spanish housekeeper with looking after the guests. Presumably, since witchcraft ran in the blood, most if not all of the new arrivals would be involved in the ritual. Together with the Lincoln coven itself, that meant an enormous number of prospective witnesses to murder. Were they absolutely certain of everyone's loyalty, or was it simply that they expected to have so much power that they feared no legal reprisals?

I decided that I just had time to go down to the chandler's on South Pier before it closed and acquire a replacement dinghy for Sea Witch. Fred would expect me to do so, since I had contrived to lose his and in any case I could not rely on lobstermen to provide me with a regular ferry service to my mooring. The dinghy would have to be something big enough to carry quite large boxes. Although I could probably tie up alongside the boat bringing out the art works from the French coast, I would still need some means of getting them ashore in England. I assumed Harry Kerridge would be arranging transport from there.

As I walked down to the harbour, it still nagged away at me that I didn't know what was so crucial to Harry about this last smuggling run. Why at such at late stage? Why take the risk of trusting a new courier whom he had known only a few days? In an emergency an ordinary cargo was surely expendable; the smart move would have been to dump it overboard from his French boat. If his grand scheme worked, even a loss running into millions would be inconsequential in a matter of days. And why would Charlotte so readily concede a fee much greater than the going rate? The only possible explanation was that some item in the shipment was a critical part of the ritual itself. How could I discover which item it was? I wondered if I could open the packages during the voyage without making it apparent that they had been interfered with.

The other source of my perplexity was that Charlotte and her husband seemed to be working together on this. I had assumed that Orson's plan involved concealing his true identity; hence the false name. For Charlotte to be aware of the special significance of this last run surely implied that she was a party to her husband's plans?

There was of course an outlandish possibility of double bluff. Could it be that Orson was deluding himself as to Charlotte's ignorance of his plans? Perhaps she was just using him to assemble what was needed for the ritual? Was it possibly not her ignorance, but her knowledge of what was contained in the shipment that had led her to risk a personal visit to Jersey?

By the time that I reached the chandlers my head was spinning. There were so many possible interpretations of the evidence that I could not begin to think how to establish the correct one. A combination of the morning's experiences, Charlotte's booze and these intricacies left me decidedly the worse for wear.

I decided to buy a small bluff bowed, clinker built dinghy, which would be big enough for the job and yet small enough to hoist on board Sea Witch and stow on the cabin roof. I paid for it and for the painting of Sea Witch's name on its stern and told the chandler's I would pick it up the next day.

To clear my head, I walked back along the front, through the hive of activity around the bus station and down La Route de la Liberation towards the Esplanade. I regarded every seagull I saw with the deepest suspicion. When I reached the slipway where the amphibious ferries depart for Elizabeth Castle, I stood and looked over the sea wall at the dark vista of St Aubin's Bay. The sea which had so nearly claimed me earlier in the day lapped peacefully against the shore; the castle slumbered on its rock; the horizon and the sky merged into one at some indefinable distance from where I stood.

How many times had I stood here with problems on my mind when I was younger? Then, the sea had been a gaoler that imprisoned me on a small island where nothing ever happened. Now, it seemed a moat behind which I could hide from dangers on the mainland that I did not understand and wasn't sure I could cope with.

The German blockhouse on top of the castle was picked out by the floodlights. Relying on a moat and walls, I thought, had done the occupying forces no good. In any case my enemy was already within the walls and the girl that I had to protect was not. In chivalric terms, I had no choice but to sally forth.

"A Jersey penny for your thoughts," came a sudden voice in the gloom. It was not a voice that I had expected to hear again and certainly not in Jersey. I turned to find Raphael standing behind me, wrapped up warmly in a belted overcoat with the collar turned up and a scarf wound twice around his neck. He wore a trilby hat with a small feather in the band and his hands were thrust deep into his pockets. He was stamping his feet as though to restore circulation.

"Don’t tell me this is a coincidence," I said. "I don’t believe you just decided to take a Christmas holiday in Jersey."

"Head Office does like a good cover story," he said. "But I think your knowledge has advanced beyond that stage. I believe you said you had an insoluble problem."

"When?" I demanded. "When did I say that?"

"Approximately five minutes ago, I believe," he replied. "Of course if we’ve misunderstood then I’ll be on my way. I must say that this is not my idea of a nice afternoon for a stroll."

"No, I have a problem right enough," I conceded. "There’s something that I’m missing here. I have to know more about the sacrifice through Moloch. There's some relatively small thing that they need for the ritual, but for some reason they've had to wait until now to bring it into England. You probably know that I'm being hired to smuggle it; come to that, you probably know everything that's going on here."

I was suddenly irrationally angry. "Why in hell are you letting us struggle like this? Why don't you just sort it all out yourselves?"

Raphael smiled, unperturbed. "Come now, Tobias, you know very well why," he replied. "This world was made for man's free will. Without free will there can be no moral goodness and without moral goodness there's no point to humankind; one might as well have a world of perfectly behaved robots. A robot cannot be morally good because it cannot be morally evil either; strangely enough the same applies to our firm's founder. Since His nature requires Him to maximise goodness and since moral goodness cannot be achieved by either perfect beings or robots, He had to develop an imperfect, but potentially perfectible, agent in order to allow moral goodness to exist. You have some wisdom now; you must see this."

For some reason I understood him perfectly well; I had not considered it before, but it was just a logical development of Kierkegaard's philosophy. The only problem was that I had never read Kierkegaard.

"All right, so why does the need for free will preclude your telling me what's going on?" I demanded, scarcely mollified.

"Because that's what freedom is, Tobias;" he said patiently, "the opportunity to make the best choice you can with the limited information at your disposal. If you knew everything; if you were omniscient as we say, then you'd be God, wouldn't you? We've just established that God doesn't make moral choices. How can he? He always knows the right thing to do. Limited knowledge is a necessary condition of free will."

"And free will includes the freedom to do evil," I said, more calmly, "because a will restricted to only good choices is not free and its possessor is not a moral agent."

"Inevitably," he nodded. "This is an unusual case because although your knowledge has to remain limited, there was some knowledge that you possessed before, but had forgotten; my remit was to remind you of it. That's what I did. As for the things that you have never known, well, I will do what I can if you ask me the right questions."

"You and Mother Victoria both speak in riddles!" I exclaimed. "I never heard any of this magical stuff before in my life."

"That rather depends on what you mean by your life," said Raphael enigmatically.

Very well I thought, still simmering. So we're going to go on talking in riddles, are we? Well I can do that. Talking like a spy is difficult, but if it's a riddle you want, I'm your man. I should write down all my wise sayings because I could make a book out of them. Then again, perhaps I already had. I did my best to snap my befuddled brain into gear.

"My enemies are too calm," I said. "The witches are a little over a week away from the most momentous day in their lives. One or two might be naturals at coping under stress, but, by the law of averages, someone should be close to cracking. Now people may be calm because they know enough to be in control of events, or because they don't know enough to know that they aren't in control of events."

Raphael smiled. "It's good to see you back to your old self," he said.

"Harry Kerridge is unlikely to be someone whose calm stems from ignorance," I continued. "He's outnumbered. He won't rely on his hired muscle to overcome witches. Harry is not afraid because he believes he has a secret weapon. There is something powerful; something that is connected in some way to Solomon's Key; that is what I am supposed to bring to him. According to Judith's people he may have discovered some clue to it in the ancient scrolls he used to decipher."

"If he found this in an ancient scroll, then he cannot be the only possessor of this knowledge," said Raphael, looking out to sea. For a moment I failed to grasp his meaning. If Harry's ability to decipher ancient languages was unique, than surely it was perfectly possible that the knowledge contained in the scrolls was his alone?

Then suddenly I understood. "The writer of the scroll possessed this knowledge," I said. "Solomon possessed it. Harry has learned that some relic of Solomon himself is required in the sacrifice through Moloch; something that Solomon used in the original binding of Baal three thousand years ago that has to be used again to reverse the process."

"There are no relics of Solomon in Israel," Raphael said. "Everything of his was swept away by waves of conquerors: Babylonians, Assyrians, Romans."

"Parts of Herod's Temple probably contained stones from Solomon's," I said. "It was built on the same site. Right up until relatively recent times masons would build old stone into new walls."

"And of Herod's Temple," said Raphael, "there's only the Wailing Wall left. You're not suggesting that Harry's transporting that?"

"Judith would have noticed it was missing," I smiled. "But there is something and whatever it is, it's too hot to handle for more than a few days. There could be no other reason why they've left it so late to get hold of it. There could have been relics of Solomon dispersed all over the world. If some had ended up behind the Iron Curtain, say, earlier this century, there'd have been no chance that the communists would admit to having them. Since the fall of communism, things in that part of the world have tended to go to the highest bidder, especially if bidder has the right connections; in this case the highest bidder could easily have been Harry Kerridge."

"Plausible," mused Raphael.

"I'll take that as a yes," I went on, sensing my understanding deepening with every moment. "An object that was integral to the ritual; Solomon would have kept that sort of thing in the temple wouldn't he? How do I find out what was in Solomon's temple?"

"Read what you call the Old Testament," he replied. "First Book of Kings, chapters six and seven."

"Two chapter's worth sounds like a lot of stuff," I said, unsure how I should begin to whittle down the list.

"Oh it was a lot all right, but it was so important to Jewish tradition that the description of the artefacts is in the Bible twice; The Second Book of Chronicles, chapters three and four contains more or less the same list."

"Important to Jewish tradition?" I wondered. "But Jewish tradition centres on the worship of Yahweh." Raphael drew in a sharp breath at the profane mention of the Sacred Name. "None of the items in these lists is the object I have to transport, is it?"

"In later life," said Raphael with distaste, "Solomon had seventy wives and hundreds more concubines. The Bible says seven hundred wives, but that is another error in translation."

"He had a great empire," I said, picking up the hint and remembering. "Many of these marriages were political; a lot of these women were foreign; they worshipped their own gods. Solomon could not force them to change their religions without offending the very governments with which the marriages were supposed to bring alliance; so he tolerated alien religions in Israel."

"Worse," said Raphael, "he set up high places for such worship; groves on hilltops; the roof-tops of the royal houses."

"One of these women was special to him," I said. "He was so under her spell that he was even drawn into her way of worship. She worshipped Baal-Hadad, didn't she?"

"She did," said Raphael.

"Solomon was tempted to serve Baal;" I continued, drawing the knowledge from I knew not where, "for a while he did. But then from somewhere he found the strength to draw back. Ecclesiastes; 'I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets,' saith the preacher. Solomon was the preacher; Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes."

"In his old age," said Raphael. "That is, as it says, a bitter text."

"There are others," I said. "'Be not over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?'" It was the text that Judith had completed for me. "Solomon understood what you told me at the beginning of this conversation; that man should not know everything. There were things that Solomon knew that he wished he had not learned. He had learned how to release Baal from The Void; he had used Baal to gain some of his fabulous wealth."

"And he had realised," said Raphael, "that happiness does not come from wealth. 'Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity.'"

"Gold," I said. I stared out towards the darkening horizon where the answer coruscated in the distant sunset. I had known it all along. "Baal's gold; the lust for gold caused so much moral evil. When Solomon repented he used gold to confine Baal."

Sammie had told me the necklace must be gold to hold a charm. "The object that I'm to carry is made of gold. Its weight will give it away."

I turned back towards Raphael, looking for confirmation of my reasoning, but as quietly as he had come, he had slipped away. Had he been there at all? I was alone on the Esplanade.

Or not quite alone; walking towards me from the direction of Swanson's was the unmistakable figure of my favourite detective sergeant. Like Raphael she was wrapped up against the chill. She stopped in front of me and smiled.

"I saw you from my window," she said. "You looked as though you could use some company."

"Didn't you see him?" I asked.

"Him who?" she replied. "You were wandering lonely as a cloud when I saw you. I thought I'd risk a quick outing to cheer you up."

"Raphael was here," I said. "He was here until just a moment ago."

"Oh my," she gasped. "You are chosen indeed."

I took a deep breath. "And you're not wearing your towel," I grinned.

"I don't suppose you would notice," she replied with a smile, "but I really do try quite hard not to attract unnecessary attention. Do you want to tell me what Raphael said?"

"He gave me something to think about," I said. "I'll explain when I've got my head straight. In the meantime Sammie's gone back to England to avoid Charlotte and Charlotte's invited me to dinner in the Grande."

"What are you complaining about?" Judith demanded, accepting without complaint my reluctance to discuss my 'angelic' encounter. She's a very friendly lady and beautiful with it; you have to make all the necessary sacrifices to retain her confidence."

I recognised that brittle levity that professionals use to combat their worst fears. "That's not what worries me; though I have to admit I can't face the prospect with the enthusiasm I might have raised a few days ago," I said, trying to match her mood.

"I will resist the obvious temptation to make remarks about what might be raised," she replied with a completely straight face. Then she matched her tone to mine. "Tobias, the safest place for

Harry Kerridge is in gaol and that's where I'm going to put him, with your help. After that I'll help you do what you have to do."

"You will?" I said. "Why should you do that?"

"I told you," she said. "Raphael was sent to me too. He said you'd need help; I said it would be a privilege." I looked her straight in the eyes and saw honesty; she meant exactly what she said.

"Well then," I said. "To begin with Harry; I told Charlotte I want cash on delivery from Harry in person."

"That was good," she nodded. "If we have him directly involved in a contraband shipment we have him bang to rights." She paused, then added, "Sorry, that's me sounding like a policeman again."

"That's all right," I said, "You still don't look like one." With something of an effort, I tried to revive our earlier humour. "Pity about the towel though," I observed.

She laughed. "It was Solomon," she replied, "who chased after seven hundred women. You don't need to try and beat his record."

"It was seventy," I said. "It's a mistranslation."

"Is that so?" she said quietly. "Walk me back to the hotel; it's getting cold out here."

Judith gave me a hug and a peck on the cheek as we stood outside Swanson's. Before she disappeared into the foyer I thought I would ask her one last question.

"Judith," I said, "You'll know about Hebrew names. Tell me what does Jedidiah mean?"

She looked at me oddly. "Jedidiah?" she said. "It's strange you should ask that."

"Why so?" I asked.

"Jedidiah means 'beloved of god'" she replied. "Did you know that Solomon was not the great king's given name? Solomon, or Schlomo in Hebrew, means 'peace bringer'. It's a name he took when he ascended to the throne. His given name was Jedidiah."

A light drizzle was beginning to fall and the wind from the sea was blowing it around into the faces of the people hurrying by. I was no great distance from the Grande, but it was still too early and I needed to be back at my mother's flat in case Sammie called. I turned up my coat collar and set off up Gloucester Street.

XXXI - 20.00 Wednesday 29th December

"Awake, O north wind and come thou south,"

The night was completely overcast and very dark. The wind, which had been a gentle breeze when I had sailed from St Helier, well before dark to avoid arousing suspicion, had been strengthening steadily since nightfall and now blew gustily from the north east, bringing flurries of snow to mingle with the spray thrown up by Sea Witch's bows. It was very cold.

To the south and less than a mile away I could make out lighter patches of sea; the surf breaking around the jagged granite teeth of the northernmost outposts of Les Minquiers. These rock pinnacles, known as ‘The Minkies’ to generations of English seamen, are a navigator's nightmare; I did not like this idea of a rendezvous point one little bit. Charlotte's telephone call had assured me that it had been selected for security's sake. I told her that I thought I was more likely to be sunk here than detected by Excise cutters. She was sure that I could do whatever the Breton skipper could do and in any case it was too late to change.

It was six days since I had driven her to St. Peter's airport, after a largely sleepless night in her room in the Grande Hotel. Charlotte had looked better than ever in the morning. She might be thirty-six, according to Sammie, but she showed no signs of slowing down and I have to admit I found it even more difficult that morning to think of her as evil. It was hard to think of her as anything, in fact, except an exciting and enthusiastic sexual partner, albeit I felt guilty as sin afterwards. When we parted at the new airport terminal she promised to make contact with details of when and where to collect the shipment and told me she would come to visit me in London before too long.

There had followed five days of almost complete normality. Although the tension of waiting for Charlotte's message steadily grew as Christmas came and went and the Millennium approached with no word, I knew that there was nothing that I could do but exercise patience. I could not call Sammie without arousing suspicion, but she called me three times, assuring me that all was well with her, which brought some easing of the strain. Her phone calls were like a drug, the effect of which gradually wore off as I waited for the next one.

During our first telephone conversation Sammie had been apologetic about leaving so abruptly and distressed to hear what had actually happened to me at Devil's Hole. She assured me that her spell could not have produced the effects I described.

"I've told you over and over," she pleaded, "I can't do that heavy stuff. I set up a will o' the wisp distraction. It's just the sound of my voice to tempt the demon into the cave and keep him there long enough for the gateway to close. It's supposed to confuse him not kill him. Charlotte must somehow have found out what I'd done and set up the maze, just as she set up the attempted drowning on our voyage, but I can't think why she would do that and then help you out of the water. Did she say anything about why she was there?"

"Yes she did." I had no possible explanation but some version of the truth. "She wants me to transport something to England. She didn't say what. I'm waiting for the details."

"That's very strange. Why you and why now? It doesn't make any sense to me."

"That makes two of us. When I know, I'll tell you, but I thought it made more sense to seem co-operative than to refuse. If she thinks I'm helping her she may let her guard down a little."

I don't think Sammie was entirely persuaded that Charlotte was not simply pursuing me in order to spite her; rather like a cat torturing a mouse before killing it. I explained that Charlotte had simply dropped me back at my mother's flat and that she had left Jersey the next day. Sammie let it rest; if she suspected what had really happened, she said nothing; she would, rightly, have been confident that nothing was ever going to compare to our last night together in St Helier.

Sammie was astonished at Victoria Delabor's survival to such an incredible age. When I explained that Victoria Kerr had died she became sombre again.

"So the check list was accurate," she said. "We just misunderstood which Victoria it referred to."

"It looks that way," I replied. "But Victoria Kerr had two grandchildren. I had a friend in St Malo do a little bit of digging into her descendants. I hope you're sitting down, because this may come as a shock."

Sammie's voice betrayed no emotion. "I'm all ears," she said.

"Well then," I went on, "her great great great grandson is Harry Kerridge."

There was silence for a few moments on the other end of the line. Then she did sound shocked as she whispered, "Orson? You're kidding!"

"Afraid not. There's more, I'm sorry to say." I explained about Elaine and about Orson's studies in Jerusalem. "It's quite clear," I said, "that Orson is after the same thing that Charlotte is. What isn't clear to me is whether they're working together, or as rivals."

Sammie still couldn't believe it. She insisted that she had never sensed the power in him. If he genuinely was a warlock then he was somehow able to screen the fact from other witches, but she doubted that included Charlotte. It would require extraordinary powers to operate such a spell continuously for so many years.

"And if Mother Victoria's prophecy is to be believed, Charlotte is going to come out on top in any power struggle on New Year's Eve," I added.

"Victoria said Charlotte was going to succeed?" Sammie's voice sounded uncertain.

"She said that the witches would fight amongst themselves, but the red witch would come out on top. Remember Caroline also warned me about the red witch. That can only mean Charlotte; she's the only redhead involved, isn't she?"

"That she is." Sammie seemed to recover her composure. "Well, I've warned you about her often enough too. Let's hope neither of the dear ladies is any great shakes as a prophetess."

By the time of our second conversation, a fax had come through from Doreen containing a photograph of the young Victoria Delabor. Give or take a hairstyle and a staid Victorian dress the face was, as I already knew it would be, the image of Sammie. It was clear that this was no genetic accident.

"Can witchcraft influence the appearance of the unborn?" I asked Sammie.

"I don't know for sure," she said. "I've heard it said that black witches who practice animal sacrifice use a bit of genetic material and a spell when they're breeding the animals. The idea is for the progeny to be a clone of a successful sacrifice. Modern science does the same sort of thing, I guess."

I understood. In the case of a human being a single hair root would contain the victim's DNA. Perhaps a locket bearing a tress of Hester's hair had been preserved throughout the next century disguised as a family heirloom. When the time came for Victoria to be conceived the hair would have been used in a spell just before copulation; the resulting conception producing a child identical in all physical respects to the previous victim. However character is only partially genetically determined; cultural background and upbringing also have a crucial influence. Victoria and Sammie were not willing sacrifices like Hester.

"We can assume that your mother would not have practised this spell," I said to Sammie. "Someone probably practised it on her before you were conceived."

Sammie sounded angrier than I had ever heard her. "You're saying I'm not just unlucky enough to draw the short straw, I've been bred for the job?" she raged. "Well Victoria obviously managed to avoid the fate her family designed for her; she's my precedent. I'll just have to do the same."

"Victoria escaped by making a run for it," I said. "You can still follow her example."

"And have someone else die in my place as she did? Some unsuspecting relative who doesn't know what's going on? How could I live with myself if I allowed something like that to happen? Toby, you know I have to stay and fight them. They don't know that I know; that gives me the element of surprise and I have a few quite nasty surprises for them up my sleeve, I promise you." There was no shaking her determination.

Aside from these telephone calls, I had experienced a family Christmas which was remarkable only for its ordinariness. Maman and I joined a gathering of the clan at Grandpapa Henri's place in St Mary's. He took me out to the barn and theatrically removed the dust sheet covering his pride and joy, the Javelin that he was rebuilding. It was virtually finished, after two years of loving restoration and drop dead gorgeous if you are an enthusiast.

"I know where there's a Riley RMA rusting away in a London garage back lot," I told him. "I could get it for next to nothing. Why don't I stick it on a trailer and send it over to you? You can rebuild it and I can scour the mainland for the parts you need."

Grandpapa Henri was well over seventy years old, but he had lost none of his engineering dexterity or his enthusiasm for a challenge. Before I left we had a deal. I told him he would need to pay special attention to the heater because I was not enjoying the mainland winters. Everything was so normal that the events of the previous week seemed like something out of a dream. I could almost have believed that I had imagined it all, had it not been for the phone calls and faxes which periodically reminded me of the outside world.

By Wednesday morning I had begun to think that Charlotte's message would not come in time. Could I have been wrong to think that the shipment contained something vital to the ritual? The fat lady might not actually be singing, but she was on stage and taking a deep breath. On the phone from London, Judith Silver, with supreme professionalism in the circumstances, urged patience. Then I finally got the call that I was so nervously awaiting.

I had sailed west on leaving St Aubin's Bay, past La Corbière and out towards another group of rocks some ten miles offshore, before going about when I sighted them and tacking backwards and forwards until the daylight was gone. My objective was that no passing ship or aircraft would suspect that my destination was in fact Les Minquiers. As I sailed back in an easterly direction in the darkness, Corbière again welcomed me and set me on a southerly course towards the Normandy coast. I was determined to go no closer to The Minkies than I was already until I saw the signal that I had been told to expect. The wind must have been gusting to force five already; it was threatening to blow even harder and there was an ugly swell running that would make the transfer of cargo uncomfortable.

The treacherous rocks were no place to be caught without enough sea room to gain an offing and I had more than just my own neck and Fred's boat to be concerned about. I had arrived early at the rendezvous, but the appointed hour was now five minutes gone and I still could see nothing but the outline of the surf and a deeper black against the blackness that was the first fang of the rocks. I was beginning to entertain unpleasant suspicions that I had been fooled by a neat little scheme designed to keep me away from Lincoln.

Sea Witch slumped into the trough of a larger than average wave and then soared again to the crest. Did I see a light between myself and the rocks? Sea Witch dipped into the trough again and as she rose once more I could clearly pick out two orange lights, well above the surface of the sea and perhaps half a mile away to the south. I didn't know whether to be glad or sorry. My confederates were much closer to shoal water than I was and although they might be locals and well aware of what they were doing, I had very little practice in this area and none in these conditions. I ran the answering light up the halyard and stood south towards them. In this wind I could carry very little sail, but Sea Witch bounded forward like a fresh horse from the starting stalls and narrowed the gap to hailing distance in a very brief space of time. The other vessel turned out to be a small Breton fishing caique, scarcely larger than Sea Witch herself.

I exchanged passwords with her skipper, bellowing above the wind and we manoeuvred alongside with great caution, the two hulls grinding on the rope fenders that the fishermen placed between them. It was obvious that the position could not be maintained for long. Four small wooden boxes were manhandled across and a figure in oilskins jumped down from the higher freeboard of the smack on to Sea Witch's deck to help, as I thought, to stow them below. No sooner however, was the newcomer safely on board than the Breton skipper cast off and stood clear. His engine started up and he began to move away quickly to the south west.

"Attendez!" I shouted after him. "Wait! I didn't agree to take a passenger!" There was no response. His masthead lights were extinguished and he disappeared into the gloom.

"Who the hell are you?" I demanded of the oilskinned one.

"Toby, the rocks are very close. Should we not get under way first and I'll explain later?" A woman's voice, with a New England accent. Peering through the gloom I could see long black hair cascading out from under the sou'wester and tucked inside the collar of the oilskin. What on earth was Nadia doing here, on a windswept small boat in mid-Channel?

Nevertheless, she was right. The Minkies were far too close for comfort; the swell was still rising and questions could wait. Whilst I busied myself wearing Sea Witch round and laying her on a course back towards Corbière, Nadia lifted the boxes below into the cabin. I tried, in the midst of fighting for sea room, to take note of which box she moved first. She found and switched on the cabin lights. Evidently she was unconcerned about being detected. I could not leave the deck to discover what she was doing in the cabin and she did not reappear on deck for some time.

It seemed that we had made the rendezvous none too soon. Another ten minutes and it would have been almost impossible to come alongside the smack, let alone pass across the boxes. The wind was less gusty now, a steadier and stronger blow from the north east. The swell was perhaps eight to ten feet and rising all the time. Sea Witch was already under minimum canvas. She was a sturdy and well built craft; she handled storms well, although she could be awkward in lighter breezes. I was not concerned about the safety of the boat, once we were clear of The Minkies, but I was concerned about my unexpected passenger.

After ten minutes or so, Nadia returned to the deck, still clad in her oilskins and carrying a mug of cocoa in each hand as she braced herself against the violent motion to stagger across the cockpit. She passed one mug to me and then sat down next to me in the stern-sheets.

"I'm sorry I took so long," she said. "I had to find my way around down there. It took me ages to find the light switch. I hope you don't mind my taking the liberty of using your galley?"

I had to concede that the cocoa was welcome. I had had nothing to eat or drink since nightfall and the cockpit was cold and inhospitable.

"I'm grateful to you," I replied, "but I still don't know what you're doing here. Charlotte said nothing to me about picking up a passenger; just packages, she said."

"These packages are important," Nadia said, speaking loudly over the noise of the wind in the rigging, despite being only a couple of feet away from me. "Did you expect us to let you bring them on your own?"

"I did have that general idea," I said. "This voyage is going to be no picnic in this weather and we have to sneak ashore when we get there. What if we get boarded by a Customs launch? How am I going to explain you?"

"You needn’t concern yourself," replied Nadia, "No-one will find us."

"I wish I had your confidence," I returned.

"I said no-one will find us," she insisted, "I arranged it myself."

"What did you do?" I asked, "Bribe the entire Customs Service?"

"Don't play games with me, Toby," she said, her voice humourless. "You know perfectly well what I mean; I arranged it."

I looked sideways at the face under the sou’wester. Spray glistened on her skin and little rivulets ran down her cheeks, but her gaze was unblinking and her expression calm. I did not like the look of this any more than I liked the sound.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," I replied, "but I'm afraid I don't have the least idea what you mean."

She was silent for a moment and then in the same harsh tone, she continued, "All the others in this affair are fools; they know nothing, they suspect nothing. But you, Toby Le Tocq, you are not a fool. I smelled trouble when I first saw you. You, I think, know everything - or perhaps almost everything. You did not, I think, expect me. So there is a little of the story you do not know. Perhaps I will tell the rest of it to you before we have to say goodbye."

The way she pronounced the last few words sounded final and left little room for doubt that she intended something rather more permanent than going our separate ways at the end of the voyage. Nevertheless she was hardly, it seemed, in a position to threaten me. She was a woman, alone, on a strange boat in dangerous waters and with a storm rising. On the mainland waited, I hoped, a goodly number of Her Majesty's Customs and an adequate force of police, waiting to pick up the goods and Orson with them when he arrived to make the payment. Unless Nadia was an expert single handed sailor, I was safe from any attack, by weapon or by magic, until we made landfall and thereafter I would have reinforcements. Since she had not yet divulged precisely what it was that she thought I knew, I continued to affect innocence.

"I repeat," I said, "I'm flattered that you think I'm smart, but I'm terribly sorry, I really don't know what you mean."

"The boat is now invisible to human eyes, Mr Le Tocq," she replied. No more first names; now we were down to business. "No-one will board us, because no-one will see us. I arranged this just a few minutes ago, down in the galley."

My face must have given me away. She smiled grimly. "I see by your expression that you are not all that surprised. Nor are you looking at me as though you were trying to work out how to humour a madwoman. Do you intend to persist in your tiresome story that you don't know what I mean?"

She was right; there was no point in my affecting innocence if she was openly claiming to be a witch, though I knew from Raphael that this was a very unusual thing for a witch to do. I reckoned Nadia must have been confident that the confession placed her in no danger and that was not a healthy sign.

"I had heard that the family practised witchcraft," I reluctantly conceded.

"Of course you had and what's more you know that witchcraft is real," Nadia's smile was of satisfaction, not amusement. "And you have heard much more than that, have you not?" she continued. "About the Millennium, perhaps?"

I tried to get out some sort of denial, but she waved it away like a tiresome insect. "Not from Charlotte," she went on. "She, poor woman, deludes herself into thinking that she has found herself another pretty toy-boy who suspects nothing and just happens to be able to offer us a convenient boat at the precise moment when the police have closed down all our other routes. No, you heard it from Sammie. All that nonsense she talked about the two of you splitting up after a one night stand; did you take us for complete imbeciles?"

I was becoming distinctly unhappy with the way this conversation was progressing. I liked it still less when she added, "Sammie has even less subtlety than Charlotte; her affection for you has changed her entire behaviour. She goes around glowing with puppy love as though she were just another ordinary human being."

With a sickening realisation, I understood that Sammie was wrong to believe she could take the family by surprise. They knew she was aware of what they planned for her and the knowledge did not disturb them. Just as Nadia seemed confident that I was powerless to use my knowledge to hurt her, so they did not fear anything that Sammie might attempt. I knew that pleading was useless, but I had to try.

"Why can't she be allowed to be just another ordinary human being?" I demanded. "Let me take her away with me, right away from Lincoln. Neither of us will bother you."

"You are right there," she replied. "Neither of you will bother anybody. You I fear will not be around after tonight and as for Sammie ... well, she may think she is prepared, but she will fulfil her destiny." There was not the slightest flickering of sympathy from this woman that Sammie had thought of as the kindest member of the family. There was no point in trying to negotiate any further, but I was far from persuaded that my own position was even serious, let alone terminal.

"It's nice of you to make me a cup of cocoa before finishing me off," I mocked her gently.

"I see no reason to behave in an uncivilised manner," she replied. "There is nothing you can do to escape."

"I might be able to think of a few things," I smiled. "For example, I could sail this boat back into St Helier."

"You will find that your course is predetermined," she said flatly.

"Oh sure!" I said, "And this is a spinning wheel in my hands." To demonstrate my point I put up the helm to jibe Sea Witch across the wind. I gave her an enquiring look as the boom slammed across the deck, causing us both to duck smartly and the boat lay hard over on the other tack.

"Consult your compass," said Nadia.

I did so. To my consternation, the heading was exactly the same as it had been before the manoeuvre. That was not possible, but somehow it was happening. It could have been that Nadia had only hexed the compass and not the boat but, given all the other powers that the various witches had displayed recently, I thought it more likely that our course had indeed not changed.

"I told you," she returned my mockery; "there is no escape. Things that are impossible for you are perfectly possible for me."

The sense of security which I had felt was now more than a little undermined. Perhaps Nadia really did not even need me to get her to England.

"Are you going to sail the boat yourself?" I asked.

"Only if you make me," she replied. "I'm in no hurry to be rid of you." She took a sip of her cocoa as though threatening me with imminent demise was a perfectly companionable sort of thing to do and we could go on chatting together as if nothing had changed.

"And what is this predetermined course, then?" I persisted. "There are a fair number of turns to make in order to reach Poole, assuming you still want to make the rendezvous with Orson. We can't just sail a straight line on our present heading; we'd end up in Ireland or Greenland or somewhere!"

Nadia was unmoved. "You kindly drew everything in pencil lines on the map in the cabin," she said. "That course is now locked in. We shall make our turns when we reach the points that you plotted, whether you co-operate or not. I would rather you co-operated. It will make the voyage less unpleasant."

"Suppose I just push you overboard?" I returned, with as much menace as I could put into my voice.

"Really Mr Le Tocq," she smiled, as impervious to threats as I had, until recently, thought myself. "Did they teach you nothing at school? You can't drown a witch. Look at all those trials by water in the middle ages. Such a lot of unfortunate women perished in the interests of proving their innocence. The mobs never caught a real witch of course; if they had, they would have found that their method of investigation was correct, but they might not have appreciated the consequences. No more would you if you attempted physical violence against me."

"I presume you have a suitable man-killing spell, do you?" I growled.

"Why waste psychic energy?" she replied. She took a snubnosed automatic pistol out of the flap pocket of her oilskins and pointed it briefly at me. Then she returned it to her pocket. "Before you attempt to seize the gun," she continued, "you should be aware that these bullets cannot harm me. I arranged that too, when I loaded it."

"My, my," I said thoughtfully, "we have been a busy little bee, haven't we?"

It seemed I was in danger after all, but not in immediate danger. As Nadia seemed in a talkative mood I decided to talk. I did not suppose that we might strike up enough of a relationship in a few hours for her to feel any qualms about killing me, but I was not about to take her word for it that escape was impossible and when I escaped I wanted to be as well informed as I could be.

"You're quite right, of course," I began, "I didn't expect it of you. Did you know Sammie actually likes you? She thinks you're the only reasonable one in the whole family."

"A little attention to detail like that goes a long way when you're operating on your own for all these years," she replied. "She was a sweet child; it did no harm to make her childhood more pleasant than it might have been. Just as it does no harm to make this voyage as pleasant as possible," she indicated my half finished cocoa, "despite its inevitable conclusion. I have no animosity towards you, or towards her. You both have your roles to play and when your parts are concluded you must leave the stage, that's all."

I wondered whether one of the secrets of successful witchcraft might not be the detachment of intellect from emotion. Here was Nadia talking in the most matter of fact way to her intended victim, as though she were likely to persuade me of the logical need for my own death. Was this how Charlotte could put the face of friendship upon her evil too?

"I think you have overestimated me; you really have me foxed," I shook my head in what I hoped looked like bewilderment. "What exactly do you mean, 'operating alone'? You're part of a coven aren't you? And part of a smuggling gang too?"

Nadia smiled. "I thought you had it all figured out except where I fitted in," she replied. "I see I was right. It will do you no good to know now, but it will do me no harm. In return, you will promise to co-operate during the voyage."

"I don't seem able to make a run for it for the time being," I said. That, after all, appeared to be the fact of the matter. "I most certainly don't promise not to do so when the opportunity arises. I have no ambitions to provide you with target practice."

"Ambitions, I fear, are out of the question for you," she said. "I regret it, but it is necessary, that is all. Yours will be the fourth death that it has been necessary for me to arrange." She smiled almost sadly, but with a hint of pride in a job well done. "I had no animosity towards Elaine, or towards Frances and her husband either. They simply stood in my way and had to be removed."

This did not fit with my knowledge of the family's recent history at all. Elaine had died nearly fifteen years ago; Sammie's parents had died before Michael met Nadia. She hadn't been around when any of them died and what's more she was only in her early thirties now. How could she have been responsible for their deaths?

"You’re not making any sense," I told her. "They all died before you arrived at Borminster."

"I have a destiny too, Mr. Le Tocq," she replied. "I have known it from an early age. My power was quite sufficient to have arranged their deaths by the time I reached the age of ten, let alone in my later teens."

A couple of weeks ago I would, as she had suggested, have taken her for a madwoman; now I was bound to take her words for the truth, staggering though they were. Moreover I was bound to agree that a triple murderess would be unlikely to balk at a fourth killing. However her claim was hard to comprehend. I could see why Nadia would have needed Elaine out of the way in order to take her place as Michael’s wife and hence at the heart of the family ritual. Elaine had been a witch, but maybe not one of great power.

Nadia by contrast had to be powerful enough to kill other witches and to conceal from Orson the fact that she had murdered his cousin. That she had so concealed herself was evident from the fact that she had replaced Elaine not only in Michael’s bed but in Orson’s plans.

"Why was Frances in your way?" I asked her. "Were you afraid she would protect Sammie?"

"That's one way of putting it," Nadia almost smiled. "Keep her to herself might be more accurate. How do you suppose Sammie came to be born?" This cryptic remark gave the lie to most of what I thought I knew about Frances. Sammie had regarded her mother as protective, but then she had also been mistaken about Nadia. The poor girl had been betrayed by all those that she had trusted and yet was still willing to risk her life to save others.

"I can see how you got where you are today," I said grimly, "though I'm damned if I can see why you'd want to be."

"Did you think only the English knew about the millennial gateway?" she snapped. "My family has possessed The Calf of Solomon for centuries, waiting patiently for this opportunity."

"The Calf of Solomon?" I had never heard the term before, but I made the connection. That had to be the relic used in the original ritual; the vital last piece of the puzzle. If her family had possessed it for centuries without an opportunity for its use, it followed that it was of no use in centennial rituals but only at the millennial gateway. Nadia had confirmed my theory; now I had to get her to identify the artefact more precisely. "Do we have it in the cabin below now?" I probed.

"*I* have it below," she said proudly, with emphasis on the 'I'. "Part of my plan was to keep it away from Borminster until the last moment."

"And are you going to let me see it, since I seem to be paying a high price for its transportation?" I enquired. "I should like at least to see what all the fuss is about."

She seemed to make up her mind quickly. "You may see it," she said, "before you have to leave us. It is in the white box. But you must not touch it."

"Why not?" I ventured a little irony. "Am I supposed to worry that it might kill me?"

"That, I agree, would be the least of your worries," she smiled at the joke. "No, Mr. Le Tocq, The Calf has been handled only by great witches for centuries; for one who is not The Chosen of Solomon to lay hands upon it requires the use of powerful magic. If a non-witch were to touch it the discharge of psychic energy would destroy everything for miles around; even I could not tell how far the devastation might reach. That was why I had to package it myself."

She misread the calculation in my eyes for confusion. "You see do you not, why you must not touch it?" she enquired. "Your end is inevitable, but you would not wish to take countless innocents with you. You are an honourable man after all. Honour, sadly, will be the death of you. You could have abandoned Sammie and walked away from all this ten days ago; I had rather hoped you would."

In the past few minutes Nadia had shown what appeared to be a softer side. Was this how she had charmed Sammie? Was she attempting to disarm me in the same way? Or perhaps she was not quite so good at separating emotion from logic as she would have me believe. If so, perhaps she was more vulnerable than she thought.

"Why Borminster?" I asked. "If you have this Calf of Solomon, why couldn't you summon Baal in Lithuania? Why did you have to eliminate all these people and marry into the Delabor family?"

"Borminster is the place that the gateway will open. Semiramis is the acceptable sacrifice," she replied simply, spreading her hands. "That is why she bears the name of the most powerful woman who ever lived; to honour Baal. At the time of her conception I was too young to bear the child myself. But I am worthy to be The Chosen of Solomon."

That explained what not only Nadia but also Orson was doing in Borminster. Presumably as the legitimate heir of the Riggs he too felt himself worthy to be The Chosen of Solomon. The thought of what might happen when all these contending ‘chosen ones’ attempted to pursue their separate interests whilst simultaneously opening a gateway to The Void beggared the imagination. But I wondered if I detected a small chink in Nadia’s armour. "I am worthy to be," she had said, not "I am." And she had been too young to bear the sacrificial child herself.

"How did you know about her?" I persevered. "The so-called Rigg family curse is only known to a few local specialist historians in the Lincoln area. I can't believe the fame of it has reached Lithuania."

"It depends whether you make it your business to find out, does it not?" she answered. "Harry also found out, because he thinks it is his destiny too. I had to be very careful with Harry; he is more cunning than the rest of them put together. Like you, you see," she smiled. "But like you, he took me at face value. He was glad of my co-operation; he would have run much greater risks in the smuggling without me."

"You paint the forgeries of minor masters over the top of genuine major ones," I said.

For a second she seemed to hesitate. "You know more than I thought," she said after a moment. "I see that I have dealt with you none too soon."

"Did Michael go to Lithuania of his own accord?" I changed the subject again since I still wasn't too keen on discussion of my impending demise, "or did you help him along a bit?"

She smiled again. "What do you think?" she said.

Nadia took my empty cup and returned with it to the cabin, leaving me to ponder on her startling revelations and my own apparently ineluctable fate. I put the helm up one more time to test whether she needed to be in the cockpit in order to control our heading. The compass needle did not waver. It seemed I could not change Sea Witch's course; a course that at no point brought us within swimming distance of land until our arrival in Dorset. In any case, even if I could have swum for it, once off the boat I would not have survived more than a few minutes in this bitterly cold sea and mounting storm.

The storm - the storm puzzled me. Nadia was able to control our course. She claimed to have made us invisible and I was willing to believe that she was telling the truth in that respect as far as other humans were concerned, though Sea Witch remained perfectly visible to me. Why then had she not also arranged for a smooth and quick passage, as had Victoria on our outward journey?

The storm was getting decidedly unpleasant. By the time that we had weathered La Corbière again and had made, without my assistance, our first course correction to sail very close to the wind up the west coast of Jersey with St Ouen's Bay some three miles to starboard, the wind had reached force seven and the swell height was fifteen feet. Nadia had not returned to the cockpit. I had discovered that I could control the attitude of the boat, to minimise the effect of the wind and the waves upon her, but that no matter what angle her bows met the sea, her course remained inexorably northwards.

When we finally cleared Grosnez Point, the relative shelter of the island's coast was lost and the storm vented its full force against us. Sea Witch clawed resolutely northward for another mile or so, but it soon became apparent not only that she could make no further progress on this heading but that perseverance would present a serious risk of capsizing.

I saw the glimmerings of an opportunity. My pre-planned course could not be maintained in these conditions; if we were to survive the storm, let alone make England in time for Nadia to participate in the ritual, then the course had to be modified. As if to confirm my analysis, Sea Witch gave a great shudder and her mast bent like a tree in the gale. The storm jib split with a crack and started to flog itself to shreds. Nadia came on deck, minus her oilskins, wearing just jeans and a fisherman's knit sweater. She had evidently been resting in the cabin. How much psychic energy was all this control draining out of her?

"What's happening?" she demanded.

"This is getting close to hurricane strength!" I bellowed back. "She can't hold the course; she'll turn over or tear herself to pieces!"

"What do you want me to do?" She accepted the situation reluctantly, but inevitably.

"Give me back control of her course," I shouted back. "The coastline of Jersey runs north east from Le Col de la Rocque to Sorel Point; there are lots of inlets along that stretch where we can shelter until this storm blows itself out."

"Why should you do this?" she demanded. Even at her best volume I could scarcely hear her words above the howl of the gale. "This changes nothing; I cannot let you go when we reach England."

I had no intention of waiting until we reached England, but there was no reason not to let Nadia think along those lines if she was so inclined.

"I told you before," I replied, "I'm giving no undertakings about England; but if we don't change course in the next two minutes we're both going to the bottom and The Calf of Solomon with us. That is of course, unless you can transform yourself into a sea eagle and fly off with it in your talons!"

Nadia looked at me grim faced. I had reckoned correctly that, if she had ever had the power to do such a thing, she had used up too much to be able to do it now. She arrived at a pragmatic decision.

"You will have control of our course again for so long as it takes us to reach shelter," she announced. "But remember, I have the gun. I shall be watching you from the cabin." She went below again.

A few seconds later, the compass needle began to waver as it should have been doing all along. I brought Sea Witch's bows round to east south east; she was under my control again for the time being, in so far as this pitching heaving hell of wind and spray permitted control of any sort. Strangely, as soon as she settled to her new heading, not only did her motion become easier, but she seemed to develop about her a little lake of calmer water, around the edges of which the storm continued to lash with undiminished ferocity.

It was like no natural phenomenon that I had ever experienced and I was pretty sure that there was nothing natural about it. Nadia might be able to control our course and prevent us from being seen by human eyes, but up on the cliffs between Le Col de la Rocque and Sorel Point there lived an old witch who had already given a fairly convincing demonstration of her control of the sea. I had turned the yacht's bows in the direction of La Hougue Sainte and simply trusted that Mother Victoria was aware of my situation.

If the storm had not been her work it had been a very fortuitous coincidence and I had given up believing in coincidences. I had a destiny to fulfil, like all these others, on Friday night and I needed a little help to fulfil it.

Under little more than a sliver of surviving sail, Sea Witch closed the coastline at an alarming rate of knots. The cluster of bright lights that I could see not far away to starboard had to be the group of smart hotels at Greve de Lecq, full of revellers gathering for the Millennium celebrations in less than forty eight hours' time. The tide would be perhaps an hour and a half short of full and a good part of the beaches covered. I knew how close to the coastline I could sail, given Sea Witch's draught, but did Nadia? Her automatic's bullets could make a fair sized hole in me, whatever they might or might not be capable of doing to her.

I had no idea what defences she had against physical force, but I was willing to believe that I should be unable to overpower her and seize the weapon. I did not propose to try. My best hope, I reasoned, was to surprise her by running Sea Witch aground. When the boat struck I would make a run for it and be as far away as possible before she could recover. If I could make it a longish shot she might miss. I knew the island and she did not; unless her witchcraft enabled her to track me like a bloodhound, the advantage once ashore should lie with me. I had a chance of slipping away into the darkness.

By my reckoning Sea Witch would not weather Rouge Nez on her current heading. Greve de Lecq is a small sandy bay, enclosed by great cliffs. As high water approaches, the beach is divided into two small sections by a spit of land ending in a cluster of sharp granite teeth. The main hotels are situated on the larger, western beach; Rouge Nez marks the eastern extremity of the other.

I let Sea Witch fall off a point from the wind, to aim her bows directly at what I fervently hoped was the smaller, eastern stretch of sand. I remembered it to be a couple of hundred yards wide, if that and sloping away quite steeply towards the sea. If the tide had been a little fuller, Sea Witch could virtually have arrived on the promenade before she ran aground. As it was, I would have some beach to cross, where I would be visible and a relatively easy target. I had to chance it. I needed Sea Witch intact, or I could have run her on the rocks on the other side of Rouge Nez point. I also needed her not to drift away again with the last foot of tide. I bellowed to Nadia and she stuck her head out of the cabin.

"What now?" she asked.

"I'm going to lash the wheel and go forward and ready the anchor," I shouted. "When we reach the shelter of the inlet I'm aiming for I'll bring her up into the wind sharply and let go the anchor."

"All right," she called back. "Do you need any help?"

I was relying on the belief that Nadia's decision to keep me alive for the time being had been dictated more by the fact that she was no great sailor than by concern that my last hours should be happy ones. Of course I could have used help to drop anchor, but I had to pray that she did not know this.

"I can do it myself," I shouted. "If you want, you can watch me from the cockpit." Nadia was still not wearing her oilskins and water was flying across the deck in great sheets, shoulder high. The noise of the wind drowned out the noise of the breakers ahead unless you listened carefully. She shook her head, took out the pistol and waved it meaningfully, then closed the cabin door again.

By the time that I had lashed the wheel, Sea Witch was already enclosed by the outreaching arms of the bay and rushing landward. I had scant seconds to ready the anchor.

If I had moved any sooner Nadia's suspicions would have been aroused by my prolonged absence in the bows, but I had not allowed time for the windlass to jam or my frozen fingers to fumble with the lashings. I stumbled forward, muscles aching from hours spent cramped beside the wheel.

I could see the surf very close ahead. I reached the anchor housing. To my amazement the lashings were cast off already and the cable paid out to the requisite length and coiled neatly on the foredeck as though we were in harbour rather than in the eye of a great storm. It was none of my doing, but I was grateful. I crouched in the bows with the anchor in both hands and my right foot braced forward against a ringbolt.

Ten seconds; five; I could see the odd light on this part of the shore, but I reckoned that by this hour most people would be abed, recovering from the festivities just past and saving their strength for the festivities to come.

At the last moment, Sea Witch seemed to draw back, as if to gather her strength and then she flung herself upon the beach. The bows pitched downwards sharply as the keel struck first and I half jumped, half fell into the shallows, letting the anchor drop overboard with me. Almost before I cleared the salt water from my eyes and mouth, I was up and struggling through the undertow on to the beach. I knew the cliff path passed close to the south of the thin neck of Rouge Nez and towards it I headed as fast as my stiff limbs would carry me.

I heard a shout from behind me, but I wasted no time looking back. With any luck Nadia would have fallen over in the cabin, or even struck her head on the table. The wind was still roaring into the little bay and the waves pounding ashore. They might break over Sea Witch's deck and delay Nadia further.

The yacht would take some damage before I could get back to her but there was no time to worry about that now. First I had to put as much distance as possible between myself and the woman who wanted me dead and had the means to achieve her objective.

My sea boots were not made for running but my bare feet were even less so; I kept the boots on. I gained the cliff path, half surprised that I was still alive and continued at the best pace I could muster, with breath now coming in short pants and tearing at my lungs. Across the boundary of the rifle range I ran and towards the next headland, L'Ane, beyond Rouge Nez. After that there was a rather deeper bay, around Isle Agois, before Le Col de la Rocque. I must have gone the best part of a mile before I chanced a pause to look behind me. A commando would have known not to show his white face in the darkness. A couple of hundred yards away there was a brief flash and the sharp bark of a pistol. I ducked instinctively, though I should have been too slow if Nadia's aim had been true. Where the bullet went I neither knew nor cared; she had missed me and I was off and running before she could fire again.

If she was using the gun, I had a better chance than I might have hoped. Guns I could understand; I had been shot at before and survived, albeit more through luck than skill. If she had the means to bring me back by magic, I reckoned she would by now have done so. As I had thought, controlling the boat for so long had lowered her reserves. I hoped it might have slowed her down as well, but as I pounded on towards the road leading down to the Priory I had the feeling that I was not losing her. The instant I reached the road another bullet passed near enough to my ear for me to feel the wind of it. She was closer, or her aim was improving.

The road cuts off some distance, as the cliff path takes two sides of a triangle, up to Le Col de la Rocque and back again. I could make better time on the road, but I would be more visible and an easier target. I stuck to the cliff path; that was my mistake. As I approached the point where the path converges with the road again, just as the cliffs of the coast turn sharply northwards up towards Devil's Hole, I sensed rather than saw a movement in front of me on the road. It was unlikely to have been an innocent passer by at such an hour and in such weather. I dropped down into the heather. There was another shot. She had taken the road and she had got ahead of me somewhere off to the right.

I rolled sideways, got to my feet and plunged off the track, through somebody's back garden and into the thick bracken and undergrowth that separated me from the path down to Devil's Hole. I had no great love for the place after my last visit, but I knew how to handle it, or so I thought and I hoped that Nadia didn't. If the spell was not still active, or if it had been broken by my escape from the cave, then I was making for a dead end in more ways than one, but I was running out of breath and out of options.

The winter had thinned the vegetation, but there was still enough tangled brush to impede my progress considerably and I could hear my pursuer not too far behind me, following the way I was clearing and making better speed. Was it possible that the spell which had turned Devil's Hole into a maze had been Nadia's? Was I thinking that I was making for it of my own free will but in fact being herded like a beast? It was a gamble, but Nadia had not wanted me dead before I had provided her with transportation for The Calf of Solomon; the chances were good that the spell was not hers.

How long had it taken me to run from Greve de Lecq to Devil's Hole, I wondered? Would the tide be too high for me to force my way through the tunnel? Would the storm be so fierce that the surge would fling me against the walls of the cave and break every bone in my body? Would Nadia follow me into the cave in the darkness, up to her chest in water? I reckoned she would follow me, if I could get there and lead her in. A woman who would not stop at multiple murders was unlikely to be deterred by a wetting. After all, had she not told me herself that witches could not drown?

As I reached the steep path down the hillside, another shot rang out and the bullet plucked at my sleeve. Had it damaged more than my coat? I was in so much pain from my searing lungs and desperately tired muscles that I wasn't sure I would feel a flesh wound. People who have been shot in combat sometimes say that their brains were so busy dealing with other emergencies that their wounds took several minutes to register. I risked taking the track and hared down it for dear life, with a last effort of my leaden legs.

The wet socks had long since chafed my feet sore and I doubt that the speed of my progress would have been enough to outdistance a fit geriatric. Nadia was obviously fitter than that; as I reached the point where the path doubles back, I heard her call out to me.

"Give up Mr. Le Tocq, can't you see you're finished? Die like a man, not a rabbit!"

I preferred to avoid both options if given the strength and I hurled myself down the track and over the parapet, sliding and skidding into the Hole, scraping the skin from my hands as I grabbed for holds and ripping the seat of my trousers when I lost my grip and bounced a dozen yards on my backside. As I landed in the water, Nadia fired from the higher north side of the Hole.

The bullet struck a rock within a yard of me and luckily the ricochet went whining off in some other direction than mine. A surge of water boiled out of the cave and leapt into the air, obscuring me from her view. By the time she fired again I had waded to within a yard of the cave mouth. The bullet went through the fleshy part of my right thigh and I collapsed into the foaming salt water. Another surge tumbled me over, almost flinging me out into the open again; by some miracle I was able to regain sufficient footing to drive myself forward and into the blackness.

There was maybe three feet of air space, but I knew the next surge would fill it. I caught my breath and braced myself forward as I felt it coming and even so it nearly knocked me down again. I lifted my feet as the water dragged back and allowed the undertow to sweep me further into the cave. When I looked back, the cave mouth was a barely discernible paler patch of blackness, against all the other blackness and apparently a hundred yards away. Forward there were three such patches; no seven. Back again and the number of entrances had grown to maybe ten and even further away. I braced myself for the next surge and again let the undertow carry me back and further into the labyrinth. From a great distance I heard Nadia's voice calling to me again.

"Mr. Le Tocq, you can't hide from me! I see in the dark like a cat. And I told you before, you can't drown me. If you won't come out, I'm coming in to get you."

"Come along then!" I shouted. "Come and get me!" Whether she could hear me or not, I have no idea.

Now I had to concentrate my tortured mind and body on getting out at the other end. The surge in this confined space was like a battering ram. The next one lifted me off my feet and so high that I had to raise my arms to ward off the impact of the cave roof. The sharp granite speared my hands again.

I tried to float as nearly horizontal as I could and let the undertow drag me forward once more. Witches might not be able to drown, but the same could not be said of me. I lost track of the timing of the waves and choked on water instead of air when I tried to prepare for the next one. By the time that the undertow lifted me again my lungs were bursting. How far now? I knew I could not look for the exit and must simply trust the sea to take me there, if it didn't drown me first, or smash my skull against a rock. What Nadia was doing I had no means of knowing. If she had followed me, as she had threatened, I could not tell whether she would be able to cope with the maze. I could only hope that, if I got out alive, at least she would be sufficiently delayed to allow me to make my escape.

All of a sudden I was in much deeper water, swimming now, not wading. I could hear the sound of breakers on either side of me. I realised that I must have made it to the seaward side of the cave. As I opened my eyes, another great surge almost carried me back inside. My peril was not over, because now I had to gain a foothold on the wave lashed rocks and hold it whilst the undertow which had been my friend but now was my enemy tried to tear me loose again. I struck out for the nearest likely spot and when the surge flung me forward I grabbed for it and clung like a limpet with my bleeding fingers as the receding icy water dragged at my sodden clothing.

I was momentarily free of it; I scrambled higher and clung on again as the next wave crashed against me. Three times the sea tried to reclaim me, but each time I was able to evade its grip. The fourth time the wave struck below my feet and only spray soused over me. Now I had to pray that my arbitrarily chosen route would lead me to the cliff top and not leave me stranded, unable to ascend or descend.

I cannot tell how I made it to the cliff top path again. I was still in darkness, boots squelching inside with water and slipping on the treacherous rock. My hands felt as if they had had an over-close encounter with a mincing machine and the pain in my thigh, which had been low on the agenda when I was in danger of drowning, decided to promote itself before I was ready to deal with it. My torn and sodden clothing offered no protection against the wind which blasted the cliff face and the howling of the gale blended with the crashing of the waves to form a cacophony like all the devils in Hell.

Somehow I found myself at the outer fence of the pathway, just where the little observation platform juts out from the face of the cliff. I scrambled up and over and collapsed, sobbing for breath, in the grass. When I recovered myself enough to move, I looked both ways on the path and over the railing, to see if Nadia was anywhere near. I could see no sign of her in the gloom. As soon as I could, I struggled to my feet and staggered up the path to the northern side of the Hole. There I stood, gasping with pain and exhaustion and looked down towards the cave. There was still no sign of her, but from far away below me I seemed to hear a great cry of anguish. I could not tell whether it was some extraordinary seabird, or the lamentation of a soul suffering the torments of the damned.

XXXII - 07.00 Thursday 30th December

"Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days."

The early rising farmer who had picked me up in his Land Rover as I trudged along the road from The Priory towards Greve de Lecq had been happy enough to accept my story that I had been swept away from my yacht when I tried to row ashore in the dinghy. I was glad that he did not think to ask how it was that I had come to lose my oars and drift more than a mile upwind, because in the numbed state in which I found myself on the morning of that penultimate day of the century, I should have been hard pressed to fabricate an explanation. I was simply glad that he did not mind my dripping water and blood all over his seats and floor and attempted little conversation other than to congratulate me on my survival and comment on the ferocity of the storm, which was now subsiding as rapidly as it had arisen. When he asked, looking doubtfully at my lacerated hands and bleeding thigh, if I needed to see a doctor, I explained that the other member of my crew was still aboard Sea Witch and that all being well I should find the boat anchored in the shelter of the bay. We had, I assured him a first rate medical supplies chest and I should want for nothing.

I hoped fervently that I should not have to make further explanations when we came upon a beached and battered wreck. My intention had been that Sea Witch's deep keel board should bite into the sandy shore and that when the tide rose another foot she would float off again and ride her anchor cable out into the bay as the tide turned.

It was of course more than possible, I had to admit, that the wind had driven her further up on the beach if the tattered jib had not managed to flog itself to shreds first, or that the anchor had dragged on the loose sand and the boat was on her way out to sea, or on the rocks of Le Grand Ecarceux to the west of the bay. If either of these turned out to be the case, Fred's fury would be almost enough to make me wish I had stayed with Nadia; but then again, not quite. More immediately to the point, my urgent task in recovering The Calf of Solomon might have become complicated and dangerous.

I was not really prepared for the sight which met our eyes as we came down past the hotels to Greve de Lecq in the first grey light of dawn. The water of the bay was choppy, but not seriously rough. Fifty or sixty yards of beach had been exposed by the receding tide and there, to my delight, out in the bay Sea Witch rode quietly to her anchor, as if she had indeed been moored by orthodox procedures rather than driven upon the beach in a howling gale. Unbelievably she appeared completely undamaged, apart from the tattered remnants of the jib, draped like a shroud over the bows.

As if that were not enough to gladden the heart, there, drawn up on the beach and moored by a long line to a ring bolt, was the little bluff-bowed dinghy that I had bought the previous week and had left stowed on the cabin roof in my precipitate flight. How it came to be there, I did not know. If Nadia had escaped the cave and returned to Greve de Lecq before me, then surely she would be aboard Sea Witch rather than back on land. If anyone else had boarded the vessel, would they not have used their own boat? Nevertheless, there it was, all very convenient for me to avoid another wetting. If this was all Mother Victoria's doing then I had two guardian angels.

Did it follow that because I could see the yacht then so could the farmer? I only had Nadia's word for the invisibility spell and even if she had been telling the truth the spell might have been broken by her giving up control of our course, or by her leaving the craft. Deciding to risk it, I pointed out my vessel to the farmer and explained the presence of the dinghy by saying that Sea Witch carried two and this second one had obviously carried my colleague ashore to look for me. Since he nodded sagely, I assumed I had not just identified myself to him as an escaped lunatic who could see imaginary boats.

Since I intended to go through with the delivery, as I had promised Judith Silver, I thought that it would be best to leave my adversaries in ignorance of my survival for as long as possible. If Nadia managed to free herself from the cave, she might communicate with Orson before I could reach Dorset, if only to distract his attention from herself. I therefore described Fred to the farmer and said that he was probably looking for me. He promised to keep a look out on his return to St John's and to let anyone fitting that description know that I was safe. Accepting my repeated positive assurances that I needed no further assistance and my sincere gratitude for easing my plight, my new friend departed on the Le Mont road.

I cast off the dinghy and slid it into the water. I had no choice but to board Sea Witch; The Calf of Solomon was still aboard. Nevertheless, I rowed out to her slowly and with some caution, as well as no little physical complaint from my damaged hands and thigh. If Nadia had escaped, but was confined to travelling by the same means available to me, it was impossible that she had reached Greve de Lecq first. If she retained enough of her powers to use alternative means, then I risked putting myself right back in the same situation from which I had fled; worse indeed, since my captor would be infuriated and my own physical resources exhausted. If Nadia was responsible for the dinghy being on shore, then she had set up an invitation that I was stupidly accepting.

There was little to be gained, I supposed, by trying to sneak aboard. If Nadia was indeed there, then she was in a better state than I and likely to hear the dinghy bump alongside even if she did not observe my approach. In any case I was hardly fit for clandestine operations. My heart was in my mouth as I explored the cabin and storage area once again. This time I was very glad to find them deserted, though mindful of the last occasion I had searched them, it took me a little time to settle down to a normal pulse rate.

I stripped off my torn and saturated clothing and contemplated the wound in my thigh. There was both an entry and an exit hole, which I supposed was a good thing, as long as nothing vital had been severed as the bullet passed through. If it had, surely there would have been considerably more blood and I should by now have been very faint if not unconscious. However, the bleeding had been started up again by pulling the clothing away from the wound. I cleaned and bandaged my leg as best I could and found myself fresh clothes from my travelling bag; the cabin was no place to be standing around naked in the last days of December.

Feeling rather more comfortable, I wondered whether to examine the four packages, but I decided that if it was true that the content of the white box was highly volatile then I was too close to shore to risk opening it. Moreover, although putting some sea room between me and the island would have been no protection against the possibility of pursuit by a vengeful shape shifter in avian form, I reckoned that an exhausted Nadia would be incapable of such extremes. That did not mean she would be incapable of pointing a gun across a few yards of water.

Extracting the spare jib from its stowage I made my painful way on deck and replaced the torn one. So far as I could see there was still no activity on shore that might denote Nadia's arrival. I winched up the anchor, made sail and tacked out of the bay in a northerly direction. The storm had abated completely and left nothing more than a heavy swell on the open water beyond the bay. The improvement in the weather, I supposed, would be more of Mother Victoria’s work. As Sea Witch settled on course and began to rise and fall in a regular motion I felt I could at last breathe easily again. Unless Nadia could do the seagull thing I was safe enough from her for the time being.

Was Nadia dead? If so, had I killed her? I had only her word that she could not drown and the sea in that confined space within the cave was in any case well capable of battering her to death. I felt that I could absolve myself of the bulk of the blame; she had most decidedly been trying to kill me; I had painful proof of that. I had led her into a trap, yes, but not one that I had laid and one where my powers of coping were almost certainly significantly less than hers. However if she had indeed been caught by it then it was certainly not her spell; I was no nearer understanding the phenomenon of the maze. Maybe when this business was all over, Sammie and I could come back to Devil's Hole and try to let Nadia out, if she had survived; after the Millennium there would be no cause except the desire for revenge for her to sustain a vendetta against me. On the other hand, I was aware now of a feeling which I shared with those judges who had presided over the mediaeval witch trials; it was better to eliminate the accused, just to be on the safe side.

The wind, which had been so violent from the north east, now blew steadily from the south west and the sun was threatening to break through. Sea Witch made remarkably good time. By mid morning I had cleared the Channel Islands and was crossing the main shipping lanes. There was little in sight except the distant coastline of Normandy; I had expected to see some commercial traffic.

I had to decide what to do about the cargo. I could try to get the white package to Sammie without opening it; as a witch she should be able to handle it safely. However I could not see how I could hold on to it after arriving in England. If the arrest of Orson was successful, then the packages would fall into the hands of the police. If Nadia were to be believed, that had a potential for explosive disaster. If the arrest attempt failed, then I would have to hand over the packages to Orson. I was not expecting him to come alone and Mother Victoria had been insistent that I should not reveal myself prematurely as an opponent.

What exactly was the role that The Calf of Solomon would perform in the ceremony? It could neither be concerned with the summoning of Baal nor with the exchanges between Baal and those who summoned him; not if the Riggs and others had achieved this without the relic. Nadia had agreed with Raphael that The Calf's value was concerned only with millennial gateways. It seemed, as I had supposed, that The Calf was connected with the binding of Baal and the guardianship of the book. In the hands of the right person, the 'Chosen of Solomon', The Calf could be used to free Baal from the spell and release the book. The Chosen of Solomon would then possess the same power that Solomon himself had possessed; the most powerful magic imaginable and the service of a demon.

One thing I did know for certain. If any of the Borminster witches were able to enslave Baal there was no way that they would exercise the restraint of Solomon. Therefore it was up to me to ensure that The Calf did not fall into the wrong hands. Without The Calf, the ultimate success of any of the witches was out of the question.

Since I could not hand over The Calf to the police, or to any of the Borminster witches, had I been wrong to sail from Jersey? Should I perhaps have taken The Calf to Mother Victoria? This thought gave me only a slight pause. Victoria had made clear her view that the key role in this matter was mine not hers and in any case the die was now cast. There was no way I could take The Calf back to Mother Victoria and still be in time to save Sammie, even if I avoided another encounter with Nadia on the island. It was quite clear that the responsibility was now mine. Unfortunately Marlowe had no advice for me in this dilemma. I was not playing detectives now.

Since The Calf was in my hands for the moment I could ensure that it did not fall into the hands of any of the witches simply by dumping it overboard. There might be worse ideas; whatever its role in the ritual it could not be exercised from the bottom of the sea. But then I should have to go empty handed to Borminster and I had no idea what I should be able to do there to save Sammie. The centennial rituals had not involved The Calf either but they had involved human sacrifice. Even without their magical powers the witches would have numbers on their side too. Somehow I knew that The Calf was the key to the mystery and that fate had placed it in my hands for a reason.

The only course of action that I could think of was to remove The Calf from its package and conceal it somewhere else. I could then allow the cargo to be taken by either Orson or the police, neither of whom would be likely to be in a position to give the boxes more than a cursory inspection there and then. The police in any case would not know that something was missing; Orson would find out once he had time to perform the magic required to handle The Calf, but by that time I hoped to be out of his company.

Of course, it was possible that long before then I should be out of everyone's company and Sea Witch a thousand fragments of charred flotsam drifting ashore all along the south coast. My plan, such as it was, depended upon my staying alive. If I could also retain possession of The Calf there was a chance that I could discover how to use it before tomorrow night.

If this thinking strikes you as verging on insanity, or indeed clear evidence that I had succumbed to delirium because of the pain of my injuries, I can only ask you to remember that I was truly desperate. The girl I loved was going willingly to confront death in order to save others. I had not held her in my arms since that glorious night a week ago and the interval had given me plenty of time to imagine over and over again the agonies that awaited her. How many times now had I experienced the repetitive dream of Hester's death, but this time clearly seeing the victim's face as Sammie's?

Nadia had said that The Calf could be handled only by a witch or by The Chosen of Solomon. She had believed herself destined to fulfil that role. It seemed that Orson harboured similar thoughts. Yet Mother Victoria had said that I had a destiny to outface the evil. I had twice been visited by Raphael. Could I conceivably be the chosen one? Might I be able to handle The Calf safely? The thought was ludicrous, even by the standards of this madhouse of a case; nevertheless the evidence for it was considerably better than circumstantial. There was only one way to find out and I had no better ideas. The sea around me was empty. If I should trigger a blast of nuclear proportions it would cause damage ashore, but that seemed unlikely. In any case it could only be worse if the package were mishandled after I made landfall, or worse still successfully used by a witch to obtain the *Clavicula Solomonis*.

It was not much of a choice, but I had been unnerved and exhausted and my hands were shaking as I rigged the self steering and went below to the cabin. Apart from its colour, the white package had little to distinguish it from the others. These presumably contained paintings and sculptures disguised by Nadia to resemble minor masterpieces, when in fact they were of much greater value. The only purpose in shipping them at this stage would have been to provide camouflage for The Calf itself. A superficial inspection would reveal nothing out of the ordinary in this shipment.

The wooden outer packaging of all four crates was secured by machine applied staples; it would be possible to remove these and replace them using a mallet from the tool chest if I was careful not to damage the wood. I moved the other boxes so as to give myself a workspace around the white one in the small cabin. Then I looked up at the cabin ceiling and fervently adjured the help of anyone or anything out there who happened to have my best interests at heart. I wished I had Sammie's ruby now, however much I had been embarrassed to wear it the last time. Very gently I levered out the first of the staples with a screwdriver, being careful to avoid leaving a tell-tale mark in the wood beneath. Nothing happened except that the staple came away just as it should have and I breathed a minor sigh of relief and removed the rest. The real test was still to come.

When I lifted off the lid, I found first a waterproof lining and then a layer of straw such as that used to protect crated crockery. I removed it gently, trying to keep it as much together as possible. I did not want evidence in the cabin that the crate had been tampered with. Below this was a swathe of velvet, wrapped around a single object. It appeared that The Calf was the only content of the package and it seemed to be no more than about eighteen inches square. I had suspected when Nadia lifted the package apparently unaided that any golden object within, The Golden Calf as it transpired, was small.

So far I had handled nothing but packaging; now I had to unwrap the object itself. I took a deep breath and steadied my hands. I could do this safely or I could not; I would soon know; there was nothing to be gained by worrying about it in advance. What had Sammie said about positive energy and relaxation? You let the tension flow out of you. You say to yourself, I have the power, I am invincible.

I took hold of the velvet wrapped object and lifted it from its bed of straw. There was no explosion, but I felt a tingling in my fingers. It was too late to draw back now. I carried the object carefully to the galley table and set it down. It was too heavy for its size. One layer at a time I peeled away the velvet. Each time I touched the object beneath I felt the tingling. But when I finally exposed what was beneath and it stood amidst a crumpled pile of velvet on the table, I experienced at first a sense of disappointment. This could not be The Calf of Solomon.

I was looking at an attractively sculpted statuette of a bull, but nothing like any of the ancient animal sculptures that I had seen. This was modern, naturalistic art. It was fired earthenware, not chipped or damaged in any way. It did not even look antique, let alone three thousand years old. I touched it tentatively and this time the tingling ran up my fingers and I could feel it in my whole hand. I realised this had to be one of Nadia's disguises, with the real Calf concealed beneath the pottery. It could not have been fired with The Calf inside. Nadia must have made a cast of The Calf and then used the cast as the framework for the larger statuette of the bull. The hollow statuette had then been fired on its own, before being used to encase The Calf. If so then the statuette was in two parts and the two halves could be separated.

I felt with my fingers for a seam and as I did so the tingling in my hands started again. There appeared to be a slight ridge all along the bull's spine and along the underside of the base upon which it was standing. The two sides had been glued together.

I had got this far safely and my courage was returning. I thought that if I could split the statuette without causing too much damage I should be able to extract The Calf and conceal it. Then I could re-glue the two halves and return the statuette to its case, to all outward appearances with nothing amiss. Although I had glue in the slop chest, I had nothing in the way of a solvent which I could use to separate the two halves. If I was going to break the statuette apart, I would have to do it with great care. How fragile was the ancient artefact which I assumed to be within? There was no choice, however, but to use the tools which I had available.

Laying the statuette on its side, I applied my thinnest screwdriver to the seam in its base and tapped the handle of the screwdriver gently with the mallet. Nothing happened. I tapped again, slightly harder. A chip of plaster broke away on one side of the seam, revealing an absolutely straight surface on the other side of the join. I enlarged the hole until I could wriggle the screwdriver around in it and then moved along the base and tried again. On the third repetition of this process, the base split apart longitudinally and the whole statue divided neatly around its seam so that the two halves could now be prised apart; neither side of it had broken and I mentally congratulated Nadia on the quality of her work. I lifted away the uppermost side as it lay there on the table, anxious lest I should have been in error and damaged the statuette for no purpose.

But I had not been in error. Concealed within the half bull which now lay on the table was a much smaller object. It shone with the lustre of pure gold. The little statue looked as old as the hills. I remembered seeing something not unlike it amongst the art work of Assyria and Persia in the British Museum. There was no discoloration on the surface of this statue. It looked, I thought, exactly as it had when Hiram of the tribe of Naphtali had made it.

Who on earth was Hiram of Naphtali? Why had that name suddenly sprung into my head? Yet somehow I knew with a certainty that Hiram, a native of Tyre, had made this statue and that Solomon himself had ordered it made. I was sure now that I could touch The Calf safely, though I could not have explained why. I gently lifted it from its earthenware shell and raised it into the light where I could see it more clearly. There was no tingling in my fingers now.

The statue was familiar for more than one reason; I realised that it resembled the satyr in the walled garden at Borminster. The abdomen of the bull had concealed a two legged creature with the lower half covered in scales. The great neck of the bull had hidden a torso and arms like a man. The workmanship was exquisite; better than any ancient artefact I could ever recall seeing. But then, had not Hiram been the greatest metalworker of his generation, indeed of any generation? There was no nymph in the satyr's arms, but what struck me as most surprising was what he did carry in his hand. It was a trident, exactly like that of the monster in my dream. When I looked closely at the features of the satyr, I realised with a shock that the face was also the face that I had seen in my dream.

How could it be that I had dreamed this face a week before? Was I suddenly clairvoyant? Yet I had not dreamed that the face was the face of statue, but that of a living monster. Solomon had had the same premonition and then had described the demon in minute detail to Hiram, demanding alteration after alteration until the likeness was perfect. I knew that the statue represented Baal himself.

As I turned the little figure around and studied it from different angles, I was strangely conscious that I was not experiencing the wave of relief that I had anticipated at being able to handle it safely. In so far as I had envisaged what it would be like to unpack The Calf, I had seen myself as a sort of intrepid bomb disposal officer, heroically deciding whether to cut the red wire or the blue wire first and earning applause over his radio link when his selection turned out to be correct. But it did not feel like that at all and the reason that it did not was this strange sense of recognition. I knew who had made The Calf and the details of his personal history. What was more, I knew how the statue had to be used. It was as if a key had been turned to unlock memories hidden deep within my mind. I also knew that no-one with such knowledge had possessed The Calf on a Millennium Eve since the days of Solomon himself. I had the weirdest sensation that Mother Victoria's obscure prophecy made sense after all.

That I was The Chosen of Solomon was a fanciful concept for me to accept. How likely was it that a Jewish king, three millennia ago, had foreknowledge of the life of Toby Le Tocq? And yet somehow it seemed that the statue carried with it down the centuries to me a sort of telepathic message that I could understand. That my second name was Solomon’s given name was just a coincidence and yet Raphael had said he was only reminding me of things I had forgotten. That so much of this case had unravelled so quickly was just luck and yet I had put things together that I should never have had the knowledge to comprehend. It seemed that, like Edith Peabody, I had become a medium of communication and in my case the message was three thousand years old.

I placed The Calf gently on the table and found the glue. Some small metal items, held together by caulking to stop them rattling, would give the necessary weight to the hollow statuette of the bull and it was not so badly damaged that it would not pass muster in a poor light when glued back together. When I had finished, I wrapped the bull in the velvet cloth, replaced it in the box and laid the straw and waterproof lining back on top. The staples I tapped neatly back into the same holes and they seemed to have a reasonable grip on the wood beneath. A superficial examination would now be unable to detect that the box had ever been opened. The Calf I wrapped in one of my sweaters and placed in my travelling bag. Then I went back to the cockpit, resumed the wheel and sat and thought about the implications of what I had just done.

The wind held steady for the rest of the daylight hours. Sea Witch bounded along at better than six knots, with the sea bubbling away on either side and her sails taut and drawing well. A few gulls swooped around her wake and I did my best to view them as just birds. Well before dusk I sighted the coastline of Dorset, with the Isle of Wight visible over to starboard and Bournemouth ahead as the narrow mouth of Poole Harbour began to open up to port. I went below again and called Judith Silver on the obscure radio frequency that she had told me to use.

The signal that I had arranged with Charlotte to indicate that I had the packages aboard and that all was well was to fly a red pennant from the masthead; an appropriate signal for the red witch. If there was something wrong, I was to fly a blue pennant and the meet would be called off. If, as I believed, both Charlotte and her husband were aware that my cargo was vital to the ritual, I could imagine that a blue pennant would give rise to some consternation.

On the other hand, I did not know how Nadia had planned to kill me and whether Orson or Charlotte might be in on the plot. Were they expecting Nadia to be aboard, or had she made an independent decision to accompany The Calf? Would a red pennant be issuing an invitation to my own execution? From the way Nadia had talked, I deduced that she had been alone in fathoming how much I knew about the millennial rituals. Since she had been aiming to betray her collaborators, it was likely that she had kept that information to herself. I decided that I had to risk going through with the meet and to trust Judith Silver's people to be close enough to protect me if it came to a crisis.

If the smugglers were expecting Nadia, how should I explain her absence? I had two choices. One was to claim that there had been an accident and she had gone overboard. That could land me in all sorts of trouble with the authorities; material witness in an inquest at best and suspect in a murder trial at worst, even if it didn't cause me to fall foul of the coven. The alternative was to plead total ignorance of Nadia and to claim that she had never set foot on the Sea Witch. That would open up the possibility that Orson, if he escaped the police trap, could check what I claimed with his people in Brittany. But how long would that take? We were not much more than thirty hours away from the millennium. When Charlotte had called me on Wednesday morning, she had said that it was too late to change the arrangements to collect the cargo that night. That could mean a simple telephone call was not a practical way to confirm my story and I was pretty sure that Orson and Charlotte would be far too busy, for one reason or another, to undertake any more convoluted methods in time. If Nadia had escaped from Devil's Hole, of course, my goose would be cooked from the moment she made contact, no matter what alibi I produced.

I decided to fly the red pennant and deny ever having seen her. As I sailed into Poole Bay there was just enough light for someone on shore to see the red streamer snapping out from the masthead; by the time I picked up the buoy in the harbour it would have been difficult to discern what colour the pennant was. I moved the packages up on deck and manoeuvred the little dinghy into the water. The sharp pain in my thigh reminded me that the lifting of heavy weights should really not be on the agenda. I checked that there was no blood seeping through my trousers. I might be able to claim an accident at sea, but if anyone got a chance to inspect the wound that lie would be easily exposed. I was about to start loading the packages when I noticed a motor boat approaching me from the shore.

Charlotte had said nothing about coming out to meet me. I had been instructed to take the boxes ashore and look for a Transit van, red of course, which would be waiting in the harbour area. Orson was supposed to be in the back with the money and Judith Silver's people were supposed to have all the exit routes blocked and a snatch squad ready to move in as soon as the boxes were loaded into the van. I trained my binoculars on the approaching speedboat, but the light was too poor for me to make out more than the fact that it had two occupants and was capable of a very good rate of knots. I lifted the white box back into the cabin and waited to see what would transpire.

The boat cut its engine and came round in a tight arc, close enough to Sea Witch to set her bouncing in the wash. Under much reduced power the motor boat then nosed alongside. One of her crew jumped across the gap on to Sea Witch's foredeck and made fast a line. The other, who was steering, was Harry Kerridge; he passed a line to me in the stern.

"Welcome home, Mr Le Tocq," he said. "You made good time. Did you have a pleasant journey?"

"You might call it eventful," I replied, "but I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"I understood you had insisted on seeing me," Harry smiled.

"So I did," I explained. "I meant I wasn't expecting to see you *here*, on the boat. Mrs Kerridge told me to take the stuff to a van on shore."

"You must forgive a slight change of plan," he replied. "May I come aboard?"

I stood back and allowed him to step across into the cockpit. "As long as you've brought my money," I said, deciding that my best response was to try and remain in character, "you may take your stuff away in a hot air balloon or a submarine for all I care and the sooner the better. We've timed this quite nicely for the twilight; if there's anyone watching us from the shore they'll hardly be able to see what's going on. But we needn't hang about, I hope."

"Are you expecting to be watched?" Harry smiled affably.

I hoped my guilt did not show in my face. My mind was racing as I tried to take in this abrupt departure from the script; I wasn't sure whether it meant my cover was blown, or simply that Orson habitually took precautions against leaks somewhere in his organisation. Judith's people would be ashore watching the van, which I assumed would have been left as a decoy; Orson had probably taken them all by surprise by switching to a boat at the last minute. I suspected that he would not now attempt to land the cargo at Poole, but would have alternative transport at some other point along the coast. Unless Judith could summon up a boat at very short notice, or had some other way of tracking Orson's boat and moving her people to intercept it, the bust would fail and he would get clean away with the loot.

"Mrs Kerridge will have explained to you, I expect," I said, supplying the rational answer as glibly as I could, "that the Customs have taken an unhealthy interest in me lately. Always in the past I've been tipped off about the raids, but no information system is foolproof; I'm not anxious for them to break their duck."

"Neither am I, I assure you," said Harry, still all smiles. "Let's transfer the cargo as quickly as we can. Are you alone on board?" The enquiry was casually made, but I was sure it was far from casual.

"Of course," I affected surprise. "I always sail this boat single handed."

"I thought you might have a passenger," Harry said, with half an enquiry in his voice.

"Are you crazy? I don't advertise this particular service!" I emphasised the word 'particular'.

It was clear that Harry knew more than he was letting on. My problem was to decide exactly what he meant. Was he expecting Nadia, or had Nadia taken the place of some other watchdog without his knowledge? Nadia herself was probably the more likely, but if so, it was doubtful that he could have heard from her since last night, or he would not be going through this charade of friendliness. He was trying to find out what had happened.

"No-one came aboard when you collected the cargo?" he persisted.

I continued to play it deadpan. "Who were you expecting?" I enquired. "We never had any deal about passengers."

"There should have been a courier." Harry's face showed a little puzzlement. "Charlotte didn't mention this to you?"

"I was hired to collect and deliver packages." I said, doing my best George Raft impression. "I went to the rendezvous; I collected the packages; I've brought the packages here as instructed. No-one at any stage mentioned any passengers. As far as I'm concerned, I've honoured my side of the deal. Now if you'd like to honour yours we can both be on our way."

"You're right of course," Harry smiled again. "There is a time and place for post mortems and this isn't it." I was not sure I liked the sound of that remark. "Are these all the packages?" he continued.

That was an obvious test. Harry certainly knew how many packages to expect.

"No," I replied. "I told you, I wasn't expecting to be met by a boat. When I saw you coming I didn't know who it was. You could have been the Customs, couldn't you? I started moving the stuff below."

"But everything is safe?" he asked.

"Nearly wasn't," I said. "It blew force eight at least last night. You'll never know how close you came to losing everything. It got a bit hairy out there at times." Seeing the look of concern cross his face, I added quickly, forcing a smile, "But that's what you're paying me for, isn't it? Relax, the stuff's all here. At least, everything's here that the Breton skipper passed over to me; I can't answer for what happened on his part of the voyage."

Harry seemed relieved, but I supposed he might be suspicious about why the white box was the only one that I had got round to moving below. I wondered if I might probe a little further.

"Mrs Kerridge told me you had legitimate export papers for all this stuff," I said, "but I assume it won't stand very close examination or you'd be shipping it by more orthodox routes. The fourth package was the one that the Bretons were handling with particular care, so I thought it might be the most sensitive. I got it out of the way first when I saw you; I'll just fetch it."

"Where did you put it?" Harry asked.

"Under my bunk," I replied. "Not very original, I know, but a box that size is rather difficult to hide on a yacht. You know, some things you can conceal inside a hollow spar or inside your fresh water container, but boxes are a problem. Next time, I suggest maybe you could let me unpack the stuff and stash it more securely."

"You didn't unpack these boxes?" he asked, with just a trace of anxiety in his voice.

"No," I reassured him. "I didn’t know what was in them and I didn’t want to risk damaging anything so I put them on the cabin roof, under the dinghy. A casual search wouldn't have found them there. But by the time I saw your launch I had the dinghy in the water."

I went below and brought up the white box. As I turned I saw that Harry's crewman had remained on the forecastle where he had made fast his line. There was something familiar about him, but in the near dark I couldn't see clearly enough to recognise what it was. I placed the box gently on the deck with the others. There were certainly no traces of tampering in this light.

"Now there's a little matter of nine and a half grand," I said.

"All in good time," smiled Harry. "First we have to make sure that the cargo is in good condition, don't we?"

"You're not going to open it up here and now, are you?" I complained. I could do without a close inspection of the earthenware bull at this point in time, though I realised that delay would give Judith's people a chance to get to us. "For God's sake, man, I’ve just told you the Customs may be watching. You know where to find me if there’s a problem."

"I know where you are now," Harry's voice was silky, "but where might you be tomorrow? No, you'd better come along with us to a safe place where we can look over the merchandise. You can have your money when I've seen everything is in order."

"That wasn't part of the deal!" I protested. "I have other business to attend to."

"Nothing, I suspect, that will pay you twelve and a half thousand pounds for a couple of days work," Harry replied. "Now be reasonable, Mr Le Tocq. It's not that I don't trust you, you understand, it's just that one can't be too careful these days."

On the face of it, Harry's request was reasonable. Somebody paying cash on delivery is entitled to check what has been delivered. At the same time a smuggler would never allow him to take away the merchandise before he'd been paid.

"You can take those three away to check," I said. "I'll keep this white one until you come back with the money."

"No," he said, in a manner that I found unpleasantly sinister, "I really don't think that would be safe, given your history with the Customs, and I need that particular box quite urgently. Don't worry," he added, "if you've been straight with me, I'll be straight with you. You'll get your money; there'll just be a short delay."

"How short is short?" I demanded.

"Just a couple of days," he said smoothly.

"You expect me to wait around for a couple of days!" I expostulated. "No way! For God's sake, I don't know what state the stuff's in. All I know is that nothing has been damaged by me; I'm passing the boxes to you in the same state I received them, that's all."

"Then you've nothing to worry about," said Harry much too calmly, "because the consignment reached you through a group of my operatives in whom I have absolute confidence."

I continued to protest with as much anger as I could muster. I was expected in London. People would start asking questions. But I had a growing sense that I was pleading a hopeless cause. Harry wanted me out of the way temporarily, whether I had been honest with him or not. It was a cheap insurance policy against both a double cross and the possibility that I might still be in touch with Sammie.

"By the time the people asking questions get any answers," Harry smiled, "my business will be concluded and you'll be back in circulation. There really won't be any problem, I assure you. I just need absolute security for my operation for a very short while. My colleague here will assist you to move the cargo. I believe you and he may be already acquainted?"

"Nice to see you again, Mr Le Tocq," came a Yorkshire accent from behind me. "No 'ard feelings I 'ope?"

I suddenly knew what was familiar about the man who had remained in the bows. Bert, the shorter of the two fake policemen, had made an impression on me in more ways than one. As I turned to see him starting to lift one of the boxes, I realised that I was not going to be allowed to refuse Orson's offer of hospitality.

Just to reinforce the point, when I turned back again I found myself for the second time in twenty four hours staring down the barrel of a gun.

XXXIII - 04.00 Friday 31st December

"For my head is filled with dew and my locks with the drops of the night."

I had not thought it very likely that I would be driven overnight from Dorset to Lincoln. I expected Orson to have safe houses in various locations and it seemed probable that the site of my temporary incarceration would be as far out of harm's way as possible. However, although the uncommunicative Bert had steadfastly refused to disclose our destination as he drove the van hour after hour through the wet darkness, I had reached the conclusion long before we encountered the signs proclaiming 'Stamford and the North' that we were heading for Orson's home base.

The man himself had departed in his silver grey Jaguar when the speedboat reached Swanage, where we had made a rendezvous with Bert's taller and even less communicative colleague from the Borminster Road lay-by, who had been minding a green Volkswagen van. The white box had been placed in the Jaguar's boot, the rest of the boxes in the van.

Apart from ensuring my cooperation without further argument by using his automatic as a persuader, Orson had continued to personify charm and goodwill. He made no attempt to open the packages. He had allowed me to collect my travelling bag from Sea Witch's cabin, under Bert's supervision. He had even gone so far as to apologise for the inconvenience and to hint that further financial rewards might come my way as long as I was on the level. With The Calf of Solomon in my bag and Nadia possibly dead or worse, I knew I was in danger of being found to be very unlevel indeed.

However, I would need The Calf on Friday night and not knowing where I was to be taken or how easy it would be to escape, I decided that the lesser of two evils was to carry it with me rather than leave it aboard Sea Witch and hope to be able to recover it in time. The crunch was going to come when Orson reached Lincoln and unpacked the earthenware bull, which I assumed he would want to do well before the evening's ceremonies. Alternatively, the crisis might be precipitated if, as seemed likely, they searched my bag prior to locking me up somewhere. I might, after all, have concealed a mobile phone or some other communications device. It was still potentially disastrous for a non-witch to handle The Calf.

As the van ground out the miles I was unable to sleep, despite the exhausting events of the previous night and the tension of the day. I kept thinking that Sammie would have expected to hear from me on my arrival in England and would be relying upon me to do what I could to assist her against the coven. Would she suppose that I had left her to fend for herself in this moment of crisis? Could even her remarkable courage and self control stand the pain of my apparent desertion piled on top of what must be the most terrifying experience of her life? She must, I thought, feel like Sydney Carton in the condemned cell of the Bastille, knowing that she could easily have saved her own life. I might have liked to feel that in similar circumstances I would have done the same, but I doubted it.

I had never felt the emotions I felt for her. I truly believed that if Sammie could be got out of this situation alive, I would face without panic the prospect that I myself might not. I would never before have accepted the argument that there are some things worth dying for. Fred, who is twice my age, had once assured me that a man who has nothing worth dying for has nothing worth living for. I laughed at the notion then, because although I was enjoying life since leaving Jersey, I could think of no aspect of my existence which I would be unable, at a pinch, to manage well enough without. Marlowe was not the sort of guy to put his life on the line for someone else. Since I had met Sammie that comfortable equanimity had vanished.

I had known her for just a couple of weeks and for half that time she had been separated from me. Nevertheless, I found that I could not contemplate the new century without her. My attitude to myself and my relations with other people had undergone a change. I had been just "Toby"; now I was starting to see myself as one half of the symbiotic entity known as "Toby and Sammie." And yet I was not in a position to offer any assistance to her as long as I remained Orson's prisoner, or even likely to survive unless I could escape before he discovered my deception.

Short of trying to overpower my two captors, or flinging myself from a moving vehicle, the best opportunity for escape would be afforded by stops for food or fuel. Since I had to go there anyway, the closer we got to Lincoln before I made my attempt the better, but the more closely I was likely to be watched. When we broke our journey during the evening, Bert escorted me to an isolated public toilet and back to the van, whilst his mate collected three carry out meals. Not a lot of opportunity there, such as might have been provided by a bustling motorway service area in which my minders would have found it hard either to keep tabs on me or to make a lot of trouble if I sought to attract attention. The number of my guards had temporarily been halved but since Bert was armed the advantage still lay with him. The torn skin of my hands and the aching hole in my thigh, by now certainly needing medical attention, did not inspire confidence that I would be able to fare any better in a second bout with the muscular Yorkshireman than I had in the first.

I operated on the assumption that Bert did what he was told and was not over-endowed with intelligence. In front of me, at any rate, Orson had made no accusations against me and had merely implied that I was being taken into protective custody to be on the safe side. Unless he had told Bert something different, which I doubted since there was no need for him to know, then Bert might just be going through the motions, rather than actively anticipating an attempt by me to escape. It had to be in my interest to encourage that notion.

As we drove, I kept up a string of remarks which began with a few grumbles about working conditions in this firm of theirs, but then passed on to the sort of things that I thought a genuine smuggler in these circumstances would say. I regaled them with stories of how 'a friend of mine' had outwitted the Customs, for example by immersing various items of his clothes in a cocaine solution which had then dried into the fabric, so that a subsequent immersion allowed the powder to be lifted into solution again and recovered by evaporation.

"'Ow did 'e get past t'dogs?" enquired Bert's taciturn mate. I took that as very positive encouragement and went on to explain that the clothes were also doused with copious quantities of lavender, which was so strong as to overpower all other scents. I got this idea from a lavender farm on Jersey; there is nothing like plugging home industry. I had little notion of whether this scheme lay within the realm of the possible but fortunately neither did my guards and they nodded their approval.

"A mate o' mine," said Bert, "once got away with the broken leg trick."

"The broken leg trick?" I enquired. "I don't think I know that one."

"Well," Bert grinned, "'E deliberately got 'is leg broke, see and then they mixed the smack in with the plaster of Paris when they made 'is cast, di'n't they?"

"Why did 'e need to 'ave a real broken leg?" asked the mate, obviously endowed with even less intelligence.

"In case the customs X-Rayed 'im, stupid!" Bert crowed pityingly.

"So 'ow did 'e get past t'dogs?" persisted the mate mulishly.

Bert looked perplexed. "Dunno," he mused.

"Maybe he had very smelly socks," I suggested. The laughter indicated that I might be beginning to achieve my first objective, that of lulling my guards into a false sense of security. They seemed to have forgotten that I had been on the receiving end of a beating at our first meeting and I did not remind them. It was, I supposed, all in a day's work to them and they probably accepted the possibility of violence from rival gangs as an occupational hazard rather than a reason to hold a grudge. By contrast, I still thought I owed them one, but right at that moment the desire for revenge was low on my list of priorities.

By the time that we were approaching Lincoln, I was almost one of the gang. It was still dark, but Bert said that he knew of a transport cafe which would be open, where we would be able to get some breakfast. I rubbed my sleep-grimed eyes and tried not to show that I sensed a chance for escape.

"Are they going to let you bring a plate of bacon and eggs out to the van for me?" I asked. "Mug of tea and dripping toast too, by any chance?"

"No need for that," Bert replied expansively. "You won't take off will you? We'll just all go in together."

"I would like to take something off," I replied. Bert looked suddenly doubtful of the wisdom of his generosity.

"I would like," I continued, "to change my socks and underwear. Otherwise I shall smell like your friend with the broken leg!"

Bert chuckled and relaxed.

"All right if I take my bag with me into the toilet, is it?" I concluded.

"No problem mate," said Bert, "Though misself I on'y change me socks once a week."

"I never would have noticed," I said, "if I hadn't been downwind of you for the last five hours!"

Bert's mate laughed loudly and Bert himself thought about it and then grinned too.

The transport cafe was set well back from the road. The parking area in front of it was floodlit, which I thought might be a nuisance. Three articulated lorries were parked facing north and two box vans were parked facing south. There were no cars or other light vehicles. To the left and slightly to the rear of the cafe was a fairly basic looking hostel for overnight stays and a little up the road to the right was an all night garage with two diesel pumps out the back. Running along behind all three, as far as the patch of light revealed in either direction, was a wooded area, in which scrub vegetation was interspersed at irregular intervals by large trees. The road which we had been travelling was a dual carriageway, without a hard shoulder but with an Armco crash barrier along the central reservation. A gap in the barrier allowed southbound vehicles to turn across the reservation in order to enter the parking area in front of the cafe. Beyond the southbound carriageway the land sloped upwards after a high hedge.

I had not only to work out a plan for escaping from my two guards, but also for getting clear thereafter. On the face of it this did not look too promising in any direction except the wood. It seemed unlikely that I would have time to ‘borrow’ one of the lorries and at this time of night I could not rely on getting a lift from the garage with a car that might stop to refuel. If I set out across open country, I should certainly open up the wound in my thigh.

Bert and his mate were fresher than I was; I had had almost no sleep since waking up in St Helier on Wednesday morning and I doubted that I could run more than half a mile without collapsing. In the wood I might conceivably be able to evade pursuit, but it might be some time before I could find my way to another road or some alternative means of transport to Lincoln. Although I usually like to be more than one step ahead in my thinking, on this occasion the single element of escape looked complicated enough and I decided that there was little point in considering what might be round the next corner.

I was limping badly when I got out of the van and began to walk towards the welcoming lights of the transport café. Bert regarded me with some concern. I explained that I had broken my ankle a couple of years ago and that it always stiffened up when I sat for too long without moving. His worries seemed assuaged, though I expected that he would still have had little compunction in delivering damaged goods to Orson if the situation seemed to demand it.

Bert's mate offered to carry my bag and I let him do so, because to refuse would have been suspicious. As long as he didn’t open it and touch the contents we should all be safe enough, but the furtive glances that I kept casting in its direction would have given me away to any more practised observer. I hardly dared look when he set the bag down next to the table in the diner. It would have been difficult to explain why my underwear needed to be treated as fragile. He did it quite gently in fact and spared my frayed nerves any further unravelling.

"You sit there," Bert commanded. "I'll go and get us some breakfast. Bacon and eggs wasn't it?" I nodded. He set off towards a counter which doubled as a servery for cold food and drink and as a base for a giant tea urn. Tea came in half pint mugs in this establishment; none of your effete cups and saucers, much less those dreadful plastic cups. Behind the counter a very large lady, florid in complexion and sweating profusely despite the cold outside, was in the process of refilling the urn. She turned and shouted Bert's order through a hatch in the wall behind her, which afforded the occasional glimpse of a couple of kitchen workers in greasy white aprons and caps.

Two of the other tables in the diner were occupied and the drivers at one of them also appeared to be waiting for food; that meant there might be a short delay. I wondered whether it would serve any useful purpose to try and attract attention; to shout out that I was being kidnapped and needed help. The thought of Bert and his mate manhandling me out of the door and apologising for their friend still being under the influence of last night's drinking session, inclined me to the opinion that I would do better to try and get away unnoticed and by my own devices.

Should I make my attempt before, during, or after breakfast? There is something about the smell of a transport café, as long as you are not a vegetarian or counting your cholesterol, which would incline anyone to eat first and run later. This one displayed its menus in misspelled scrawl written in chalk on a blackboard. ‘Today's speshul pud’ in the lunch menu was highlighted by a constellation of asterisks obviously intended as stars. It was apple crumble and ice cream with custard; a very proper lesson to all those impoverished establishments which offer you only ice cream or custard. Unfortunately I do not run well on a full stomach, let alone a full stomach and a gammy leg and I reckoned that when Bert had filled his belly he would start to develop an itchy accelerator pedal foot. Sadly, I had to go now, whilst we were waiting for breakfast to be cooked.

The door marked 'toilet' was in the right hand wall, close to the door by which we had entered. I pointed it out to Bert's mate and asked if it was all right if I got a wash and change whilst we waited for breakfast. He escorted me over to it, carrying my bag again, checked that there was no other exit and then relieved himself. Since he could observe the outer door of the toilet perfectly well from our table, he then returned to his seat without washing his hands, leaving me to wash on my own.

I took stock of my cramped surroundings. There were two dirty urinals and a dirtier toilet cubicle. A single sink had not been cleaned since the last driver had washed his oily hands after working on his engine. There was one grimy bar of soap and a roller towel which was a couple of months overdue for the laundry. Four feet up in the side wall was a small window, which seemed to offer the only possibility of escape; it was a sash type and the bottom section was open one inch.

I moved my bag and visited the urinal. I heard the sound of a vehicle arriving in the parking area outside. Bert came in, in something of a hurry and seemed reassured to find me suitably occupied. He took the opportunity of relieving himself too and then also departed without washing his hands. He said breakfast was nearly ready; I told him I'd be out in a couple of minutes. On inspection, the window proved to be stuck fast. I needed my black bag and all I had was a hold-all full of clothes and a smuggled three thousand year old golden artefact.

It crossed my mind to try out a bit of the 'open sesame' that had seemed to work on the door of the witching room at Borminster Hall; if I was The Chosen of Solomon and could handle explosive charms I could surely open windows. Unfortunately I found myself fresh out of spells for removing windows complete with frames. Without something to stand on, I couldn't even apply any proper leverage to the sliding part of the window; although that part consisted of a single dirt-smeared pane, if I broke it there would be too much noise and I would shred what remained of the flesh of my hands and legs on the jagged edges of glass whilst wriggling out of the narrow aperture.

The only alternative seemed to be to make a dash for the door. I was much nearer the main exit than were Bert and his mate, seated as they were at the table, but they would see me go and be after me in an instant. In my present condition I reckoned I needed more of a start. An abortive escape attempt would also undo all my good work in ingratiating myself and ensure rough treatment for the brief remaining portion of the journey.

I turned and contemplated the window again, in some desperation. As I did so, a man whom I had not seen in the diner came into the toilet. He wore dirty jeans and a denim jacket over a roll neck sweater. He had not been one of those seated in the café, so I assumed he must be the driver of the newly arrived vehicle.

Feeling a bit self-conscious about being found loitering in the toilet, I moved over to the hand basin and began washing my hands again. Could I expect this man on his own to believe that I was being kidnapped and held against my will? Since I was alone it wouldn't look much like it and he'd be as likely to treat me as a cottager as a refugee from a gang of thugs. Even if I persuaded him, there would still be the problem of getting away from my two minders.

But as I considered this, I found his behaviour was a bit abnormal too. He looked in the empty cubicle and then into the area beside the wash basin which was a blind spot from the door. Finding no witnesses present, he spoke to me.

"Mr. Le Tocq? I'm D C Scales, Fine Arts and Antiques Squad. My skipper thought you might be in need of some help." He waved a warrant card to prove his identity.

I was nonplussed. I had thought that I was on my own and that Judith had been bamboozled by Orson's switch of tactics at Poole; in fact it seemed that the police had been able to keep the van under observation.

"Am I glad to see you!" I breathed a sigh of relief. "I was just trying to figure out how well I could make a run for it with a bullet wound in my leg."

"A bullet wound!" he exclaimed. "Do we need TSG back-up?"

"I was shot last night by another member of the gang," I said. "The two bruisers I came in with don't know about that. They're armed but they haven't shown any inclination to use their guns; Harry Kerridge is armed too, but he's off somewhere on his own."

"He's in Lincoln," said D C Scales, casting an anxious look over his shoulder at the still closed toilet door. "We think he has some of the goods with him. The skip's organising a raid on his house right now."

"You have to tell her to wait," I replied urgently. "Harry has nothing with him that will count as contraband; he might not know that himself yet, but he'll soon find out. If I'm still in the company of Bert and his mate when Harry makes that discovery, I most certainly shall need help and fast. I'm afraid I was obliged to open the package that Harry has with him and remove the contents. Your DS knows why."

"All the stuff's in your van then?" he asked.

"All that you can nail him for," I answered. "You have to wait until he meets up with my minders and takes delivery."

"If you're wounded already," he shook his head, "I can't let you take any more risks. There'd be hell to pay if things went wrong. Have you had a doctor look at your leg?"

"How can you take me out without blowing the whole bust?" I protested. "If I can get away on my own they'll think it's because I've double crossed Harry, but if I get police protection they're going to know it's a set-up."

"Like you said, you can't run," said Scales. "But we don't have to be so obvious as to give you protection."

He removed a pair of handcuffs from his denim jacket pocket and explained that the two men at the table nearest the counter, whom I had taken for truck drivers, were in fact local CID. In addition he had three uniformed officers outside in a squad car. He suggested he should buzz them on the radio and get them into the café. Then he would march me out of the toilet as if I had been arrested and I could re-establish my cover by identifying the two CID as my accomplices. The woodentops would arrest them and they would noisily protest their innocence, as anyone would in the circumstances. In the confusion my two "chums" could escape.

"And it will look as though I helped them escape by fingering the wrong men!" I marvelled. "That's brilliant!"

"It was the skip's idea, I'm afraid," Scales sighed. It figured.

As it worked out, we should all have shared the Oscar for best ham actor in a transport café at five o'clock in the morning. Scales put the cuffs on my wrists and made a great show of pushing me back into the café, noisily demanding that I identify my driver. The three uniformed policemen stood just inside the door.

When I allowed my eyes to stray towards my erstwhile guards, I saw them sitting bolt upright, ready to make a fight of it if they had to. Bert's hand was already moving under the breast of his jacket. I made a minute shake of the head to indicate that he should stay put and then pointed with both my manacled hands towards the table occupied by the CID, doing my best to look cowed and submissive, as though I had been on the receiving end of a fair bit of rough handling in the gents.

The two officers at the table contrived to look both astonished and aghast; they must have had some practice at explaining themselves to their Superintendent. They loudly denied all knowledge of me and indicated that they were innocent lorry drivers minding their own business. A large number of expletives were included for the sake of added realism. When all three uniformed officers moved in to arrest them, the CID men leapt theatrically to their feet and struggled vigorously. One uniformed policeman fell to the floor. I made a show of trying to escape from Scales' grasp and as I did so I looked towards Bert and his mate and gestured with my head that they should take the opportunity to get out. They needed no second telling. By the time that the ruckus in the cafe had subsided and the annoyed lady behind the counter had stopped shouting about her furniture and her crockery, I could hear the van engine starting up and the screech of tyres as it made its hasty departure.

"All right, that'll do, everybody!" called Scales. The grappling policemen unhanded each other with a few playful shoves for good measure and Scales removed my handcuffs. "Hospital first for you, I think," he said. The large lady looked at us with astonishment.

"Toilet first for me," I replied and then, in reply to his blank look, I explained that I needed what was in my hold-all. "You'd better get on to D S Silver and tell her to hold off the raid until the van gets there."

"Right. Then hospital!" he insisted. I allowed myself to be persuaded. The leg actually hurt like hell and I had been struggling to prevent the limp looking too bad. I was anxious to make contact with Sammie as soon as possible, but I reckoned that I would be little or no use to her with incipient blood poisoning. In any case sometime before dawn was not the best time to be awakened on a day when you would need all your wits about you at midnight.

"How about the van?" I asked anxiously. "Hadn't somebody better get after it?"

"Already taken care of," Scales smiled. "Not all policemen are stupid, you know. They're going north on a dual carriageway. We have an unmarked car waiting at the next junction to pick them up."

I would have been even more mightily relieved by all these events, if it had not been for the fact that I knew how many of the local police force were involved with the coven and Judith Silver did not. When I had expected the bust to take place in Poole rather than Lincoln, there had seemed no reason to supply Judith with more of the evidence obtained on my nocturnal visit to Borminster Hall. Now she was already making use of both local CID and uniform and it could only be a matter of an hour or two at most before news reached Gough or one of his fellow coven members, if indeed it had not reached them already.

Judith knew, of course, that there was at least one bent cop in Lincoln, since she had herself investigated how Bert and his mate had come by the patrol car. I assumed that she, like me, was getting desperate enough to take serious risks. Soon it would be impossible to know whether a policeman was on our side and, even if he was, how much help he could possibly be.

For the time being, I reasoned I was safe enough with Scales. He was from Judith's own team. Even had he been local, I could see no reason why a sympathiser of the coven should spring me from Bert's custody, unless as part of an elaborate double bluff designed to lull me into a false sense of security. That seemed unnecessarily sophisticated even for witches.

I had neither the time nor the mental energy now for such obscure conjectures. I needed a doctor, I needed help from Judith Silver and I desperately needed an hour or two's sleep. It looked possible that I would shortly have all three.

XXXIV - 09.30 Friday 31st December

"The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be."

"You can't call on Sammie at the Hall without giving the game away." Judith Silver, looking as sophisticated as ever, was paying a flying visit to the Casualty Department. "I don't know why Harry hasn't gone to pick up his goods yet, I only know that he hasn't."

"Don't you have his phone tapped?" I enquired.

"Of course we do." Judith made it sound as though I was teaching my grandmother to suck eggs. "Bert telephoned Harry at six o'clock this morning, as soon as the van arrived at the safe house. He reported that the packages were safe, but you'd been arrested. He was quite complimentary about the way you'd helped them escape, as a matter of fact; your acting was obviously convincing. Harry enquired if they'd been tailed and Bert said no. Then Harry told them to stay put and hide the loot until he gave them further instructions. He didn't show any urgency at all," she grumbled, shaking her head in frustration.

That unfortunately confirmed what I thought; the packages that Bert and his mate had in their keeping were just straightforward smuggling; mere camouflage. They might make Harry some money, but after tonight he didn't expect to be encountering any problems in that respect.

"All that he really wanted in a hurry was the package he took with him," I told her, "and I couldn't let him keep that." I explained about The Calf of Solomon and its potential explosive properties.

She looked around her nervously to check if anyone was within earshot.

"Where is it now?" she asked. I indicated my bag, lying on a chair at the side of the cubicle in which I had been parked for the past couple of hours. Her face registered a mixture of horror and fascination.

"You're carrying it around in a hold-all?" she gasped. "For pity's sake, is it safe?"

"I don't know whether Nadia's claim is true or just a piece of scaremongering," I reported. "At any rate I seem to have got away with it. No-one has touched The Calf except me and I'd rather like to keep it that way, just to be on the safe side."

Judith's expression was clearing. "It's obvious to me that the 'Chosen of Solomon' is you."

"Then do you think it would be reasonable for The Chosen of Solomon to know how The Calf of Solomon has to be used tonight?" I asked quietly. "Because I do know how to use it."

"How did you find out?" she demanded.

"It told me, you might say."

Judith looked at me strangely. "Talking to animals is quite common, I believe," she replied. "The Prince of Wales would like us all to talk to plants. But I'm not sure that I ever heard of anyone who could talk to statues."

"There's nothing to stop anyone from talking to statues," I replied, "but the question is, will the statues reply? Tell me, have you ever heard of Hiram of the Tribe of Naphtali?"

"You're asking that of a Jew?" she smiled. "I had to recite that stuff when I was six." Then she realised that I was asking for information, not purveying it. "Hiram was King Solomon's master craftsman in the construction of the Temple," she said. "He made all the metal artefacts that went into it; bronze and brass work mostly."

"Two chapters' worth," I said. "First Book of Kings, chapters six and seven; Second Book of Chronicles, chapters three and four."

"Now you're a Bible scholar too?" she queried. "Tobias you do have hidden depths. Do you really need me to go on?"

I nodded. "And Hiram made a Golden Calf for King Solomon. Except that it's not a calf."

"The word can be used for any idol," she replied. "Judaism forbids graven images, but Solomon permitted them for his foreign wives."

"This one was for himself," I said. "Solomon had Hiram make it in secret; not for the Temple and not for one of his wives; especially not one of his wives. And it had to be gold to hold the two charms."

Judith looked mystified. "Two charms?" she asked. "Not only have you become an authority on ancient ritual but you can tell The Calf holds two charms?"

"One is a spell to carry the instructions to The Chosen One," I said. "The other is the power to bind Baal."

Judith's expression was almost awed. "The Chosen One has to repeat the sorcery of Solomon," she said. "Of course, that's it!"

"I might have asked 'Why me?' if I didn't have all the motivation I need," I added. "Quite how my personal motives and Solomon's Choice came together, I'm not sure."

"Are you going to show me The Calf?" she asked. "My government would have an interest in claiming it as part of our national heritage after all. Wherever it was smuggled from by Harry, it was obviously stolen from us in the first place."

"After tonight you are welcome to it," I replied. "You can take it out the same way it came in, or do whatever takes your fancy with it, assuming we win of course. The British government doesn't know it's here, so they can hardly complain if it leaves. Of course, you may have to stand surety for the good behaviour of whoever is the new Chosen One in a thousand year's time."

Judith smiled. "I'm glad that Nadia didn't damage your sense of humour when she shot you," she said. "I'm having the devil of a job, I'd have you know, to head off the local force's enquiries into how you came by a bullet wound. I couldn't avoid letting out the information that you were a police informant; it was the only way I could keep the matter in my own hands."

That meant that Gough and the others would know that too. They would know I wasn't really arrested, that I was informing against Harry and that I'd been shot. What Judith was saying was not so much that my calling Sammie would give the game away, as that I'd be giving my life away. I was mortified that I seemed no nearer to being able to bring what moral support I could to

Sammie's assistance. Judith read my concern in my face.

"It's probable, I agree," she went on, "that your cover is blown, though we don't know that information that finds its way to Gough automatically find its way to Harry Kerridge. We don't know where our esteemed Chief Constable fits in and we don't know how much Charlotte knows about Harry's true identity either. We have no evidence that the rest of the coven knows anything at all. If Harry wants The Calf as part of his revenge in his family feud he'd be unlikely to advertise the fact."

"Harry had enough contact with some policeman to get hold of a real police car for Bert and his mate," I pointed out. "We have to be careful here. There are bent cops involved with the coven; there are bent cops involved with Harry; but we have no evidence that it's the same bent cops."

"Two lots of crooked policemen in one city?" she said wryly, raising a tired eyebrow, "I believe I discern a trace of cynicism. All that I know for certain is that you're safe with me. I trust Scales; I've worked with him for a couple of years. I don't trust anyone in the Lincoln force and I don't trust anyone in this hospital. If you're healthy enough to be moved, I want you out of here."

"Like when?" I asked.

"Like ten minutes ago," she said without irony. "We're about to disappear. I'm on borrowed time too, remember. When Gough hears what's going on, he'll get my guv'nor to order me back to London. I can't have that message reach me before tomorrow."

"And Harry?" I enquired.

"If the meeting with Bert and his mate still hasn't happened by six o'clock, we'll arrest Harry anyway. We won't be able to make anything stick, but we can comfortably hold him for six hours without charge on New Year's Eve; even Harry couldn't find a lawyer to spring him in time."

I indicated where my clothes were lying in a polythene bag labelled 'patient's property' at the side of the chair on which she sat. "I can discharge myself. My leg has been X-rayed and the wound's been dressed; there's no permanent damage. The doctor wanted to admit me for observation, but they had no beds anyway; that's why I'm stuck here in limbo in a casualty cubicle. I'm glad you're here though," I smiled at Judith. "You can help me bully the admissions lady. She's a bit of a dragon."

After confirming that I could stand and move about, Judith stepped tactfully outside the cubicle whilst I dressed. When I emerged, limping and carrying the hold-all, she first made as if to carry it for me and then hesitated, as if unsure whether she was trying to pick up something similar to a bag of Semtex.

Now there is no false chivalry about Toby Le Tocq; The Calf was heavy and my leg hurt. I explained that there seemed to be no problem about non-witches handling the bag, but they mustn't actually touch The Calf itself. She picked up the bag and walked out of the hospital with it, holding it stiffly and a little away from her side, before placing it very gently in the boot of her car. I was carefully assisted into the passenger seat.

"You're too fragile to do anything tonight," said Judith, noting the way I winced as I folded my injured leg under the dashboard. "You'll have to tell me what needs to be done and I'll do it."

"I don't think you can," I said. "The Calf carried its message to me; Raphael and Mother Victoria both said I have to do this." I realised I had not explained to her about finding Victoria; she promptly demanded and was given an explanation. When I told her, she had to stop the car for a while. She looked down and the wheel and shook her head in wonderment. An irritated motorist behind us honked his horn. Judith gave him an unladylike gesture but moved off again.

"Then I shall come with you," she said. "I have been trained for this. I have three secret servicemen for back-up. We have an experimental weapon we can use."

"No," I said simply. "The Calf is the key and I am the only person who can turn it." I turned awkwardly in the seat to look at her and was rewarded by a stab of pain from my leg. "But I'd welcome company. You can pick up the pieces if I'm wrong."

Judith showed remarkable restraint. Raphael had clearly made a great impression upon her. "Lord," she said, casting an exasperated glance heavenwards, "why did you ever create Gentiles?"

"Somebody has to buy retail," I volunteered, as she started up and drove off in the direction of Borminster. Judith looked surprised for a moment and then she just laughed.

"Do you have any idea how old that is?" she asked. "My uncle

Leo in New York used to say the family owned that joke." She smiled in recollection. "He told me my great grandfather nearly lost it when the Titanic went down."

I wasn't sure why I should know any Jewish jokes, of whatever antiquity, but I rather thought this particular line was older than the Titanic; Hiram had told it to Solomon about his dealings with the King of Lebanon. I covered my confusion by telling Judith that she didn't sound American.

"I'm not," she laughed. "I was born in Golders Green; my family emigrated to Israel when I was three. That's why it was easy to fabricate a C.V. and join the police force."

"But you have American relatives?" I persisted, interested to learn about her background.

"A lot," she replied. "We all used to get together every few years when I was a kid." A smile came to her eyes with the recollection of happy times past. "New York Jewish humour is something of an acquired taste I suppose," she continued, "but it always used to amuse me."

I would have enquired further, but I began to wonder what we were doing going in this particular direction. "I thought we were avoiding Borminster Hall?" I said. "I can try and get Sammie on the phone maybe; I want her to know I'm going to be around to help."

"I'll get her on the phone for you," said Judith. "She's not got a mobile and if you ring up the Hall yourself it'll be as bad as driving up to the door. But we're not going to the Hall; we're going to Borminster vicarage."

"The Peabodys' place?" I enquired in some surprise. "How did you come across them?"

"The vicar flagged me down as I was driving through Borminster. How he knew who I was or my connection with you, I cannot begin to guess. He insisted that you should come to see him; a matter of life and death, he said. He didn't seem like a crank and he talked enough about New Year's Eve for me to realise that he was something to do with this case. Since I reckon we need all the help we can get and since in any case I've got no safe house, I thought we'd go and see him."

I couldn't go to the Hall. We had to remain in the area even though we risked alerting the witches to my presence and given the option I felt happier if the physical distance between myself and Sammie was only a couple of miles. Maybe she would gain some comfort from knowing that, when Judith was able to contact her.

"And your excuse for being out of contact with your guv’nor is that your radio has a flat battery?" I enquired.

"Something of the sort," she replied. "The old ones are always the best ones."

"Too true," I nodded. I hoped the same applied to Solomon’s magic.

It was not hard to conjecture what might have occurred to excite the Reverend Peabody, but harder to understand why he should think it was urgent? What more could there possibly be for Lady Caroline to tell me? She had set me on the road, but to judge by her earlier messages I must surely now be in possession of more information than she was.

"Did the vicar say anything about a message?" I asked.

"He said Lady Caroline was very agitated," Judith said, shooting me a puzzled glance. "Who the hell is she? I thought I knew all the Delabors, but I've never heard of her."

"No," I smiled, "you wouldn't have come across her; she hasn't been around for a while."

"Now look here," she sounded just a little put out, "I've been on this case for years. Chosen One or not, you've been on it since three o'clock yesterday. How can there be someone connected with the case that you know and I don't?"

"When I say she hasn't been around for a while," I replied, "I mean she hasn't been around in the flesh for a couple of hundred years."

She could tell by the tone of my voice that I wasn't joking; somehow this time she managed to listen to my explanation without stopping the car again.

"So this spirit lady also believes that you are the critical person for the millennial gateway?" she nodded. "There seem to be quite a crowd of handmaidens gathering around the new Solomon. I take it Sammie doesn’t yet know about your new status?"

The noise of the cars tyres on the road seemed to drop to a whisper and for a moment we seemed alone on the road. I should have found the whole concept incredible, but the conviction was now strong in me that, like it or not, I was speeding towards an inevitable rendezvous with fate that had been arranged three millennia before I was born.

"I haven't had a chance to speak to her about it," I replied. "As for Lady Caroline, I can't imagine what she wants."

"We shall have to ask her, shan't we?" said Judith, as though making requests of long dead spirits was the sort of thing one did on a regular basis.

She might have had enough shocks in the last half hour to cause a heart attack, but Judith was still an accomplished professional. When we arrived at St Winifred's vicarage, she took the car up the drive and around the back of the house, out of sight of the road. The old house was surrounded by a completely circular drive which looked as though it might have last been surfaced by a contemporary of Macadam.

John Peabody was in the back garden in the same shabby anorak that he had been wearing when I first met him. I had always thought that there was little constructive that you could do in a garden in the middle of a hard winter; I began to suspect that his gardening was not so much a hobby as a cross between therapy and prayer. His manner was nervous but welcoming.

"Mr Le Tocq, I'm so glad to see you!" he exclaimed. "Edith is being driven almost to distraction."

"I'm sorry for being away so long; circumstances have been a little outside my control."

As we walked to the house, he noticed my limp. "You've hurt your leg?" he asked.

"That," I said, "is rather a long story. Someone shot at me; fortunately it was dark and the lady's aim was poor. Her intention was to prevent me getting here in time for tonight, but, as you see, here I am."

The Reverend Peabody paused in his doorway. "God is merciful. I pray that He will continue to preserve us all. It seems we stand in the greatest possible need of His assistance."

Edith Peabody sat at her kitchen table. The change in her appearance since I had last seen her was shocking. Her eyes were red-rimmed and hollow with sleeplessness and the lines on her face were deeply grooved. Her shoulders were slumped and she rested her chin on a forearm propped on the table top. She looked to have aged ten years. When she saw me however her eyes brightened a little. I tried to look reasonably cheerful.

"Thank God!" she said quietly

I repeated my apologies, but Mrs Peabody brushed them aside. "You follow the path laid out for you," she said. "It's just that the messages have been so thick with Old Testament references that I had begun to think I was really going mad. You may understand better than I do. Can you tell me," she hesitated, seemingly almost apologetic herself, "Can you tell me, does the Canaanite god Baal have anything to do with this business?"

"He has everything to do with it," said Judith.

"I'm sorry," I said, "have you met Detective Sergeant Silver?"

"We have indeed," said the Reverend Peabody. "More than that, we were told to expect her, just as we were told to expect you. The message said that her car would pass the vicarage door in five minutes time. I went straight out and, lo and behold, the car appeared. Goodness knows what the young lady thought of me," he smiled apologetically, "but, thank The Lord she turned out to be in touch with you, just as the message said."

How on earth did a woman who'd been dead a couple of centuries describe a car, I wondered? But then again, I supposed, Lady Caroline had been no ordinary woman.

"I think she will try to get through again soon," said Edith. "She wrote that she wanted to speak to you directly, rather than through writing."

"And how did she propose to do that?" asked Judith.

"She wants us to hold a séance," Edith replied doubtfully. "I know;" she hurried on,"I never believed in that sort of thing either."

"Has she given instructions for holding this séance?" I enquired.

"We're all to sit around the table and join hands," the vicar answered. "Apparently the psychic energy involved is greater than is needed for automatic writing; the rest of us have a part to play this time."

Judith was not reluctant, but she seemed unsure. I hardly recalled seeing her so much as hesitate before. "This isn't a purely Christian thing, is it?" she asked doubtfully. "Will my presence interfere with it?"

"It's most certainly not a Christian thing," the Reverend

Peabody sighed. "I fear we all may have to come to terms with a certain amount of redefinition of our religious ideas as a result of all this."

"You're supposed to help," Edith added, speaking directly to Judith. "Lady Caroline wrote that there should be four people; I'm sure that we are the four she had in mind. She wrote about a Jewess - if you'll pardon the expression."

"Why should I mind it?" Judith shrugged. "It's what I am."

John Peabody was about to lift the kettle from the Aga and make a pot of tea, when Edith's face began to take on the same empty expression that I recalled from my previous visit. The vicarage kitchen had been warm when we came in and wintry sunlight had been streaming in through the large window which looked out towards the church, casting across the table a long shadow of the cat which sat on the outside sill.

Now there was a chill in the air, as though the door to the back garden had suddenly been thrown wide open. An icy draught touched the back of my neck, but when I looked over my shoulder to see who had entered, I found the door not even ajar. The sun must have passed behind a cloud, because the light outside the window now looked a dreary grey and the cat had disappeared.

"It's time!" the vicar exclaimed. "Quick, we have to sit round the table and join hands."

Judith and I did as we were instructed. I took Edith's left hand and Judith her right, whilst her husband faced her across the table. Edith's hand was freezing; she might have been the one who had been outside a few minutes ago rather than her husband. She seemed to have difficulty moving her fingers to grasp my hand and her arm was as stiff as that of a corpse beginning rigor mortis. I held her hand as tightly as I could. The stone of her engagement ring dug into my palm. Her lips moved soundlessly.

I don't know what I had expected. I had never attended a séance before, but the circle around the table resembled the ceremonies I had seen represented in the cinema or on television. I suppose I thought the table might move, or that Edith might begin to speak with a strange voice; perhaps the spirit of the long dead Lady Caroline had learned to control Edith's vocal chords the way that she had already learned to control Edith's left hand.

I was concentrating on Edith's face, trying to understand the words that her lips were forming but her voice not pronouncing. There was opacity about the air behind her head; I could not make out clearly the shape of the Aga just a few feet away. Then the air around Edith herself seemed to shimmer and her outline blurred.

I half wondered if I was suffering a delayed reaction to the local anaesthetic that they had given me in Casualty whilst the doctor probed the bullet wound in my thigh. I blinked and shook my head, but my vision did not clear. I could no longer see anything behind Edith and her hair now seemed to be framed by the hood of a long travelling cape, such as Doreen had described seeing worn by the ghost in the driveway at Borminster Hall.

I began to realise that the floor under my chair was not stable, but moving like Sea Witch in a moderate sea. I glanced across the table at Judith and saw her staring back wide eyed, her dark hair blowing about and whipping back from her face as if in a stiff breeze. She made a tiny gesture with her head to her right. I followed her eyes to where the Reverend Peabody was sitting. But the vicar was not sitting there, although I swear that I had never released my grip on his hand. The person whose right hand I now held and who completed the circle between myself and Judith, was a wrinkled old lady in a nun's habit.

"You are well, I see, young Tobias," said Mother Victoria.

My words came out half choked in a mixture of surprise and apprehension. "Thanks to you, I think, Reverend Mother. The storm proved most helpful. But I don't understand this. How can you be here? What's happening to us?"

"We are all here, young Tobias," replied the old woman calmly. "All of those members of the family whose lives have been drawn into this business." She smiled at me and her eyes twinkled. "I was later than Caroline expected. She had thought to see me a century ago, but as you know, since I missed my last date with Baal I concluded that I might have work to do before the next one. I am glad that I was able to be of some small service to you."

"Are we on a ship?" I gasped as the floor seemed to lurch. "I can't hear the sea."

"There is no ship," the old woman replied in a kindly tone. "The discomfort which you experience is because your astral body is unused to travelling outside your physical body. The dizziness will pass. But we must be quick; not for our sake but for yours. You and the young lady will need all your strength tonight and disembodied movement is exhausting for those who are unaccustomed to it."

"I'm not of witch blood," I said. "Neither is Judith so far as I know. How are we doing this?"

"You more than anyone are of witch blood," replied Mother Victoria. "You are The Chosen of Solomon. The world has waited a thousand years for you. The talisman has been put into your hands, as I told you it would be. You know it, because it has delivered to you the message which it has carried down through the generations. You know what you must do to prevent the unleashing of Baal. Do I speak the truth?"

I nodded, wordlessly.

"That is not why we are here," a voice came from my right. I turned, to see that I held the left hand of a young woman with dark hair, who wore a cape and a hood that shadowed her face. She might have been an adult version of the child in the Reynolds portrait. "I am Caroline Rigg," said the apparition. "I'm glad to be amongst those who help you towards your destiny. Until Victoria came here I did not realise that this was all planned. But though Solomon has equipped you to stand against Baal, even his wisdom could not foresee all the wickedness of man." The woman shook her head sadly.

"My family has become very evil," she said. "First they will try to prevent you reaching the walled garden tonight; they will not use magic to bar your way, because they need all their psychic powers for the ritual; but they will set guards on every road. You cannot use the powers of the talisman until the gateway opens to The Void. Until that time you will need help from others."

Judith found her voice. "That's where I come in?" she asked.

"You have friends who can open closed roads, I believe?" asked Lady Caroline; Judith nodded.

"I'll get there," I said, with all the firmness I could muster.

"We know you will," said the spirit, "but you are minded to pass a message to a member of our family to expect you. We are here to tell you that you must on no account do such a thing."

"But Sammie is the intended sacrifice!" I protested. "She'll be frightened to death." I hesitated just a moment. "And besides, I love her. I can't leave her thinking she's been abandoned."

"Listen to her, young Tobias!" insisted Mother Victoria. "No living member of the family must know who you are, or what you carry; the victim least of all. She already wears the necklace; she is already beyond your reach until after tonight. And the red witch still hides herself from the spirit world; none of us can identify her. Do you understand what power is required to hide the living from the dead? Most certainly one so powerful can read the mind of the victim; you might as well announce your plans directly to our enemy. Trust us to watch Sammie for you; we have yet some little power, as you have already seen. Your destiny involves the whole of mankind; you cannot imperil it for one person."

"She's not just any person as far as I'm concerned!" I protested.

"You cannot imperil the world for one person, no matter how dear to you!" Mother Victoria's hand was like a vice. "You know this; The Chosen One was not chosen lightly. Tomorrow is a new Millennium and you can begin a new life with her. Tonight you must put from your mind all thoughts but the need to ensure the continued confinement of Baal. The red witch is a mighty opponent; she and Baal will seize on any weakness. You cannot; you must not, you will not allow yourself to be distracted from your purpose for an instant!"

The floor steadied under my feet. The hands which held mine on either side felt warmer. I blinked and looked across the table at Judith, who was shaking her head and looking bemused. The light from the kitchen window behind her strengthened and the cat on the sill got up, stretched itself and yawned hugely. Had it not been gone the last time I had looked?

The Reverend Peabody let go of our hands and rubbed his eyes. Edith looked around her as if she had woken from a deep sleep and was not yet fully aware of her surroundings. The kettle bubbled and steamed on the hot plate of the Aga and I suddenly needed a cup of tea very badly.

XXXV - 17.45 Friday 31st December

"For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it."

"We've got problems, Toby."

"You mean in addition to all those I know about already?" I gave Judith a quizzical look as she took off her raincoat and flung it in some exasperation over the bed of her room in the Lincoln Post House.

After preparing The Calf of Solomon for its part in the ritual, a process that had taken some time, I had had nothing to occupy me for the rest of the afternoon and nowhere to go for fear of being seen by one or other of the occult factions. I had tried to sustain some interest in a television programme featuring Millennium celebrations from around the world. It was, as far as I was concerned, only a slight improvement on watching paint dry and it had made little contribution towards taking my mind off Sammie's predicament.

Then I realised that I must simply clear my mind and let the memories return. They came swiftly now; I realised that somehow The Calf was completing the process begun by Raphael. Reincarnation? Just a couple of weeks ago I should have ridiculed the idea.

"Gough's been pulling strings," Judith replied with a frown. "My guv'nor's been in touch with Scales to tell us not to lift Harry Kerridge without cast iron evidence. He's apparently more than a little annoyed that he can't contact me. Scales told him I was under cover and it would be dangerous for him to try and get a message to me before the arranged time."

"Which is tomorrow morning?" I suggested.

Judith smiled. "How did you guess?" she said. "But I'm afraid there's no way I can arrest Harry on my own – I'd have to take him to a police station and Gough would have him released. We could arrest Bert and his mate. They have the goods on them; if they'll grass up Harry to save themselves we could still get enough to hold him and damn the consequences."

That was the longest of long shots and I didn't think it was a good idea, as long as Harry hadn't been in touch with his two muscle men again. They didn't know about me; as far as they were concerned, I was still one of the good guys who had helped them out of a jam and that fact might just come in handy. In any case, pulling them in wouldn't give Judith any evidence against Harry that she hadn't had weeks ago. They'd never grass; they were professionals of a sort; it was part of their code.

The intervention of Gough was disappointing, but not unexpected. As the day had worn on I had become convinced that Harry would find some way of making it to the walled garden. Even if Scales had managed to arrest him, I doubted if he could have held him; not in any ordinary gaol at any rate. Somehow I didn't see Harry making a gaol break disguised as a fly, but I had sufficient evidence of powers being exercised over both the natural and the supernatural environment to believe that if a warlock wanted to get out of gaol free, he would not need to wait until he collected a lucky card from the community chest.

Gough's motivation was harder to fathom. Since the coven believed Harry to be a non-witch, they would have planned some way of keeping him away from the ritual. A temporary incarceration should have seemed like a godsend, (if witches were not offended by such a term.) Why would Gough keep Harry at liberty?

"Whether or not she's actually working with him, Charlotte Kerridge must know about Harry's plans," I said.

"No-one else would want Harry on the loose tonight. Someone with influence over Gough expects Harry to deliver The Calf and that someone has to be Charlotte. Who else knows he arrived home with a package last night?"

Judith stared hard at me. "All our intelligence says that Harry is the main player," she said softly.

"Harry's not the red witch," I replied. "At some point Charlotte will need to get her hands on The Calf"

"Which Harry doesn't have," she responded.

At this point in our discussion we were interrupted by a phone call from Scales. Judith said little and listened a lot. When the call finished she gave me a peculiar look and reported that Charlotte had gone over to Borminster Hall.

"Harry's been in the house all day; he hasn't so much as set foot in the garden since he arrived back from the south coast."

"You're sure he's still there?" I asked. Following my earlier train of thought about gaol breaks, I had it in mind that Harry might not need the Jaguar in order to transport himself to Borminster Hall.

"I told you," Judith declared emphatically, "I trust Scales; he's very good. The Kerridge house is completely covered by electronic surveillance devices; Harry is still there all right. After Charlotte left he spent ages in the cellar talking to himself in some language that none of my people could recognise; Scales thought Arabic, but I'm guessing Aramaic. Then there was a sound of something like a flower pot breaking and Harry spent a few minutes talking to himself in a language that Scales understood perfectly well, though he probably blushed when he had to tell me about it."

"So Harry now knows that somebody has stolen The Calf. He can't be certain that it's me," I said.

"He used an incantation before he tried to handle it," said Judith. "So he shares the view that it needs a witch. He'll suspect Nadia; she's the only witch who's had access to it. Moreover she's conveniently gone missing. He'll think she's lying low until the ritual. He doesn't know that you're The Chosen of Solomon and his hired help gave you a good character. He's no reason to look for you."

"He will have a plan to overcome the coven first in any case," I said. "The Calf gives power over Baal, not over the other witches. If he does expect Nadia to show up with The Calf, he'll reckon he can take it away from her."

Since Nadia was unlikely to appear, it would boil down to a straightforward trial of strength between Harry and Charlotte, or between the two Kerridges and the rest of the coven. Either way Charlotte would prevail, but she would inevitably be weakened in the process; would she be weakened sufficiently to become vulnerable to Sammie's feeble powers? It seemed unlikely, but there was a chance that Sammie could seize the opportunity provided by the conflict to escape. I knew that she would have to take that opportunity on her own; I could not defend her from her family and stand before Baal at the same time and I knew I must confront the greater danger.

"I doubt if Harry completely trusted Nadia," Judith broke in upon my train of thought. "He's a devious bastard. He was probably stringing her along the same way that she was him."

"He would have been grateful for an ally after Elaine died," I suggested. "It must have seemed like a dream when Nadia turned out to have The Calf, the very thing that he'd been looking for. And she was so useful in other ways too; in the smuggling business."

Judith shook her head. "Being Harry, he wouldn't believe in lucky breaks. When you're paranoid you don't. You're suspicious of help. He'll have worked out some scheme to ditch Nadia. He's probably furious now, thinking that she's put one over on him and got her blow in first."

"With any luck they'll all be so suspicious of each other that no one will spare a thought for us," I smiled.

Judith looked out of the window to where the narrow streets were already ablaze with lights and the raucous sounds of early celebrations were beginning to echo around the old city.

"For years I've been so certain that Harry was the one who was closest to the *Clavicula Solomonis*," she said quietly. "I was all set to stop him by whatever means I could. Now all of a sudden I have to believe that someone else will stop him and do the job I've been trained to do." She turned and regarded me with something close to a glare.

"Toby," she said, "what if we're wrong?"

"What can I tell you?" I said. "I know what to do. I know I've done it before; I remember the first time. The strange thing is I can't remember why I needed to do it the first time. I've tried and tried but something blocks the memory."

"It's hard for me to understand how you have Solomon's memories at all," Judith mused. "You know, until I met Raphael I'd never so much as had a numinous experience in my whole life. Now I've had a visit from an angel, raised the dead and been recruited as back-up for The Chosen of Solomon." She paused and then went on in an exasperated tone, "How can a gentile be Solomon?"

I'm sure it was not meant to be a test. If Judith realised that her last sentence had been in Hebrew she was probably just speaking to herself. It was a rhetorical question anyway. But it was crucial.

"How many gentiles did you say Solomon married?" I replied in the same language. "Do you really suppose all Solomon's descendants are Jews?"

Judith sat bolt upright and stared at me as if she had been shot. After a few moments she seemed to need convincing that she had not been hearing things.

"How did you learn our language?" she asked, still in Hebrew.

"The same way you did;" I replied, "from my parents."

"You don't mean the nice lady I spoke to in Jersey, I take it?" she whispered.

"No," I said, "I mean David and Bathsheba."

Judith let out her breath slowly in a sibilant hiss through her teeth. She remained silent for some time. It was clear she needed no further convincing, but now she wasn't sure how to speak to me or what to say. There was a long time to wait and it was clear that she was not going to be happy waiting in my company unless I explained that for normal purposes I was still Toby Le Tocq. King Solomon was not exactly someone with whom a nice Jewish girl could be expected to pass the time of day.

"It still seems strange to me that you wound up in an agency like yours," I said, in English now.

"You can thank my uncle in New York for that too," she said, with a little half smile lighting up her eyes as she relaxed just a trifle. "He was a big fund raiser for Israel. He had a lot of influence with the government. The last time I was over to visit him, when I left university, he said he'd make sure I got a nice job in the civil service; I didn't have any better ideas about a career. The agency was looking for someone with British connections at the time and I fitted the bill."

"Interesting, isn't it?" I said. "You thought your being here was just as much a matter of chance as I thought mine was. But nothing is an accident in this affair."

Judith gave me that odd look again. "My religion believes in things that are written," she said. "It's strange isn't it? That's something we have in common with Islam."

"It seems that my philosophy of life is undergoing what one might call a sea change," I said, "if it had not been for the fact that in the circumstances that pun is atrocious." I looked at my watch. "We've got six hours," I said. "We can't get there too early, or they'll see us. But if we leave it to the last minute, according to what we were told, they'll have guards on the roads."

"That's no problem," Judith smiled. "My people can take out any road block up to and including an Abrams tank."

"Then all we can do," I said, with more calm than I really felt, "is wait."

And so we waited. Judith phoned Scales to tell him to let her know of any significant telephone calls or other events at the Kerridge house. She read for a while. At seven o'clock we got something to eat in a hotel dining room that was so crowded with merry-makers that dinner took almost two hours. At nine o'clock, Scales phoned to say that Harry had made calls to several people, amongst them Bert, to tell them to go ahead with a prearranged plan at eleven thirty. Bert had asked whether there was any news of me and Harry said he'd heard nothing, but that it was particularly important that nothing went wrong on the Borminster road. Bert had assured him that it would not.

"Harry knows that the coven have people watching the roads," I said. "Bert's job is to open the road for Harry and then close it for everyone else."

"It would be nice to know exactly how they plan to do that," nodded Judith.

"I don't think that needs too much imagination," I replied. "The day they borrowed the police car to collar me was a dress rehearsal. Bert and his mate will roll up with their uniforms and patrol car and 'arrest' whoever the coven have guarding the Borminster road. Then they'll set up a 'police' road block for long enough to make sure Harry isn't disturbed."

"If there are fireworks like those a couple of weeks ago," Judith objected, "a police patrol car would be expected to escort the fire engine, not stop it."

"By the time that the fireworks start," I said, "it will be too late for any interruptions. Harry needs the road blocked for half an hour or so whilst he gets himself into position to hijack the ceremony. Bert will also have been told to watch out for Nadia. He couldn't stop her of course, but she might have to use up some of her powers and throw off her timing to get past them."

"Cannon fodder," observed Judith.

"Exactly," I nodded.

"So what do we do?" The way Judith asked told me that she trusted me to take the lead. I felt responsibility, but not fear. I had had no real choice from the beginning. Nadia had said I could have walked away at the start, but I knew now that had never been an option

"If we move before he does," I said, "we'll be the meat in the sandwich. We have to wait for Bert and his mate to take out the coven's road block and let Harry through. Then we have to take them out and get through ourselves."

"We'll be cutting it fine," said Judith tensely.

I shook my head. "No," I said. "It's all written."

Judith called her secret servicemen. Then we waited some more. The tension mounted steadily. She went into the bathroom and changed her dinner dress for a pair of black slacks and a thick black sweater. I wore the clothes that I had acquired earlier that day in Lincoln, with a dark overall over the top because they were rather conspicuous.

I stared out of the window in the direction of Borminster and tried to imagine what Sammie would be going through. I had never felt as desolate about anything as I felt about not contacting her. More than once when Judith had been out of the room my eyes had strayed to the telephone. I could only hope that Sammie would forgive me, if and when we came through this together.

XXXVI - 22.45 Friday 31st December

"To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven."

There were no further interruptions until Scales called again at ten forty five to say that my two friends had left the safe house and headed into town; they were wearing police uniforms. Shortly after eleven he reported with some astonishment that the pair had drawn up behind a police patrol car apparently abandoned in a back street and transferred into it. They were now heading out again in the direction of Borminster. Judith told him to let them go and concentrate on Harry; she told him to use her mobile number from now on to contact her.

"You were right," she said to me.

"And it's time we were going too," I replied. "There'll be street celebrations to work our way around."

We left the hotel and drove out in the direction of the Kerridge house. There was partying everywhere, banners and streamers festooned the streets and fireworks were going off like the fifth of November. There were many houses in the suburbs with huge bonfires in the gardens and crowds gathered around them. Music blared out at a volume sufficient to ensure that no-one would be able to see in the new Millennium in their beds.

"The fire brigade will be busy tonight," said Judith. "Their response time will be slow, even supposing they don't treat a call to Borminster Hall as another false alarm."

She drew up within sight of the Kerridge House, but not close enough to be noticed by anyone leaving it and turning in the direction of Borminster. Scales came on the phone at eleven fifteen to say that Harry was on the move; Judith told him that she was in position to take over and that he and his team could go and find themselves a party. He seemed surprised, but grateful; he didn't argue.

"Just keeping my two teams separate," Judith explained to me.

A couple of minutes later the Jaguar came out of the drive and Judith let it get well up the road before she set off to follow.

"He's a few minutes early," she said. "He'll wait somewhere up ahead for Bert and his mate to do their stuff."

A few miles down the road, the Jaguar pulled into a lay-by. Judith extinguished her lights and drew off the road, only just within sight of it.

"Please God," she breathed a quiet prayer, "don't let anyone run into us whilst we're sitting here in the dark and don't let Harry have looked in his mirror recently." She checked in with her secret servicemen again. A couple of minutes later the Jaguar moved off.

"The road block is just around the next bend," she said. "Harry will be through in a minute. He might just give them some last minute instructions."

"Just so long as they don't concern me," I said.

The seconds ticked away interminably. Then Judith's mobile phone buzzed.

"My people are in position," she said, turning to me. "It would help if our two friends both got out of the patrol car. I'd like them out of reach of the radio so they can't warn Harry."

"Unless they've improved their routine since the dress rehearsal," I said, "that shouldn't be a problem."

Another minute ticked by slowly. The phone buzzed again and Judith answered. The speaker at the other end must have been whispering, because even in the silence of the car I couldn't hear anything of what he said.

"All right," said Judith. "We're coming in now. Let them stop us. If one of them stays with the car, make sure he doesn't get a chance to touch the radio."

She started up and drove around the bend. A hundred yards away a patrol car sat in the middle of the road with lights flashing, just past a minor turning to the left which was an unclassified road going nowhere near Borminster. There were cones right across the main road and a couple of those collapsible blue and white signs saying, "Police, Accident" and "Diversion." A man in police uniform was standing beside the first sign, waving a torch. As we drew closer, I could see it was Bert. He waved us down and came over to the car as we stopped. Judith rolled down the driver's window.

"I'm sorry, miss," said Bert, "there's been an accident. Road's completely blocked up ahead. You'll have to go round the Symington road, or else back to Lincoln."

"Oh really!" Judith exclaimed petulantly. "This is too bad, we're going to miss the party!"

"Sorry miss," said Bert. "Can't help you I'm afraid. Hell of a mess up there. Five or six dead, I 'ear."

I leaned across the car so that the light from Bert's torch fell on my face for the first time.

"Bert?" I said, "Is that you? What the hell's going on? Fancy dress again is it?"

"Bloody 'ell!" Bert gasped. "'Ow did you get out? Thought you'd 'ave been banged up good an' proper."

"I made bail," I said, tapping the side of my nose like one criminal to another. "Didn't have anything on me did I? You guys had all the loot in the van. Twelve hours and they had to let me go. This is Miss Silver, my lawyer. She's just collected me from the nick. We're supposed to go to a party at Borminster Hall. That is unless Mr Kerridge still wants you to entertain me, of course."

Bert looked confused, but his loyalty to his boss's instructions was always likely to come out on top in any conflict with his limited powers of reasoning. "I can't let you through, mate," he said adamantly. "Mr Kerridge said no-one was to come though 'ere." He had the grace to feel embarrassed at depriving us of our Millennium party though and he tried to ensure there were no hard feelings. "'E was grateful to you for not givin' us away though," he confided, "'E was goin' to send 'is own lawyer to get you out tomorrow. I don't think 'e'd be bothered about us watchin' you any more." Bert turned and shouted to his mate in the patrol car. "'Ey, Jim, come an' look 'oo we got 'ere!"

Bert's mate got out of the car and came towards us. Bert turned back towards me.

"That was a bloody good turn you did us," he said expansively. "'Specially since you didn't exactly owe us no favours. Jim an' me won't forget it, see. Any time you....."

Bert never had a chance to complete the sentence. A dark figure coshed him from behind as he looked into the car window. Another did the same for his mate at the same moment, as Jim was half way between the two vehicles.

The two fake policemen were smartly bound and gagged and dragged into the scrubland beside the road. A face smeared with camouflage grease appeared at the window.

"Get the police car off the main road and clear away the road block," Judith instructed. "Then follow us to Borminster Hall. Moshe can come with us now in my car. The fun's all going to happen out the back, so we should get into the house okay, but approach it on foot and keep a sharp look out for Harry Kerridge. He's still got a surprise package up his sleeve and I don't know what it is."

The leader of the secret servicemen acknowledged her orders with just a nod and within thirty seconds the road was clear and another black-clad member of the group had climbed into the back of Judith's Renault with a large bag of equipment.

"Toby Le Tocq, meet Moshe Cohen," Judith introduced us. I nodded to the silent figure in the back seat. Judith set the car in motion. "Moshe is the nearest thing we have to a secret weapon in this field," she continued. "He has a gadget that we think ought to produce an explosive reaction if anything comes through the gateway from The Void. Of course we've never been able to test it, but it does a pretty decent job on a computer simulation." There was a cynical grunt from the back seat. "That's Moshe's way of saying he had more confidence in the F14 Tomcat he used to fly," Judith went on. "You can explain to him what you need."

"What I need," I said, "is to get into the gallery outside the Long Room without being seen."

There was a doorway in the gallery that I had noticed on my earlier visits. It led to an attic stairway giving access to the balustrade around the roof. I needed to be on the roof at midnight and I needed to get there without any stuck doors or rusty locks holding me up.

"Unfortunately I didn't have time to pack my burglar's tools this time," I added.

"No problem," Judith replied. "Moshe could get us into Fort Knox." There was another grunt from the back seat. Moshe evidently didn't believe in unnecessary conversation.

Judith pulled off the road at the gates of Borminster Hall. A Land Rover without lights emerged from the darkness behind us and parked blocking the driveway. The two remaining secret servicemen got out and disappeared into the woodland. The three of us from the car followed a hundred yards or so behind, with me carrying The Calf of Solomon in a back pack. The night was frosty and twigs crunched under my feet; the other two seemed to be able to move soundlessly. I tried harder and winced as another twig snapped noisily. My leg was still sore, but since the wound had been treated in the hospital I wasn't limping too badly.

Up ahead there was the briefest suggestion of a struggle. A few seconds later one of the two advance-guards emerged from the darkness of the wood, carrying over his shoulder a short figure in a long gabardine. He dumped his burden on the ground at our feet and the man rolled over, groaning softly. It was not Harry Kerridge, unless he'd suddenly acquired a Pancho Villa moustache.

"He was staking out the drive," remarked the secret serviceman. "Had to take him out; no way round."

"Anthony Delabor," said Judith. "What's he doing here? Why isn't he with the coven?"

"Maybe he's in with Harry?" I suggested tentatively.

"As we said before," Judith was emphatic, "too amateur."

I knelt beside the semi-conscious form of Sammie's despised cousin and shook him roughly.

"Anthony," I hissed, "I have no time for asking nicely. Tell me what you're doing here and tell me fast." Anthony groaned without opening his eyes and I shook him again. "Tell me, dammit, you son of a bitch!" I insisted.

"She said you'd come ... she sent me to watch for you ... to create a diversion," he croaked.

She? So I had been mistaken about who was pulling Anthony's strings; it was Charlotte after all. That might help explain why Charlotte had been so sure that Sammie and I had broken it off, whilst Nadia had been unconvinced.

"Did she have you following me before?" I demanded.

"Even when the two of you were ... together," he mumbled. "Put you off the scent if you happened to notice me."

"Notice you!" I cast a brief and despairing glance skyward. "It would have been easier to miss a herd of elephants in Borminster High Street. Where is she now?"

"Walled garden ... they're all there except me," he wheezed. Then his features filled with alarm. "Don't go there!" he exclaimed. "Don't let her know I failed her. She'll kill me. She's crazy!"

I dropped Anthony's shoulders back on the turf. "She might be doing the world a favour at that," I said, "but I think she may be otherwise occupied pretty soon."

Judith motioned to the secret serviceman. "Tie him up and leave him. We'll collect him on the way back."

Anthony was blubbering. "She'll kill me! She's tortured me all my life; always forcing me to do what she wanted. She's crazy, I tell you. She'll kill me. She'll kill you too! She'll kill all of you. You don't know what she's going to do tonight!" The rest of his hysteria was stifled as a gag was stuffed into his mouth and a strip of tape stuck over it.

"Oh, I think we have a fair idea," I turned away from the man I had once called Hooray and shook my head sadly.

Anthony's feeble struggles were quickly overcome by his captor, who bound him and then disappeared again into the woodland ahead to join his colleague. I took one look back at the pathetic figure, lying propped against a tree with tears rolling down his cheeks and then followed, with Judith and Moshe beside me.

"Charlotte can't think much of you," said Judith softly, "if she thought that Anthony was going to hold you up for long."

"Cannon fodder," I replied. "Just like Bert and his mate. Charlotte will think I'm alone. Anthony was intended to delay me, that's all."

"What gets me," puzzled Judith, "is how Charlotte knew to expect you at all."

"May be she read Sammie's mind," I suggested. "But she does like me, you know; she probably doesn't want me damaged."

"That's my Solomon!" Judith snorted. "What a charmer!"

It was a good joke in the circumstances. We crept forward to the edge of the woods, near to where Doreen and I had halted on our previous nocturnal visit to the Hall. One of the two leading secret servicemen was crouched just inside the tree line. Harry Kerridge's Jaguar was visible in the shadows at the other side of the drive but there was no sign of its occupant.

"The house is all quiet, at least on this side," the man reported. "It sounds as if there's a crowd out the back. We saw Kerridge go around the house on foot with a bag. Chaim's shadowing him."

Judith acknowledged the report with a nod. A glance towards the Hall confirmed that there was no activity inside and hardly any lights on. From away behind the stately home there came the muffled sound of rhythmic chanting. There was a glow in the sky as if a large bonfire was burning, but no smell of smoke in the air. We made our way quickly across the open ground to the same doorway around the side of the front steps through which I had first been admitted; it was less than three weeks ago, but it seemed more like a lifetime.

"Get us in, Moshe," ordered Judith. "Zak, be ready for trouble."

The door lock was a simple latch that took Moshe five seconds. When we were inside Judith took a quick look at her watch. "Eleven forty five," she said. "Nicely on schedule."

Moshe silenced the entire alarm system as easily and almost as quickly as he had opened the door. We made our way through to the main corridor and up the stairs towards the Long Room. The house was deserted. The Spanish housekeeper and Mr and Mrs Perkins were either involved in the ceremonies outside or else shut up in their own rooms out of harm's way. The extended Delabor family and their guests seemed to have decamped *en masse* to the walled garden; so much for Sammie's opinion that there were reasonable people amongst them.

From the gallery outside the long room we could look down into the walled garden itself. Moshe took one look through the window, drew an angry intake of breath and busied himself immediately with the doorway to the attic stairs and the roof. Zak positioned himself at the top of the stairs leading from the corridor below, in order to defend our position if necessary.

Judith and I stared out on a scene spectacularly illuminated by the orange flames of two fires set in cressets on either side of the satyr statue and by a myriad of candles, some set in many branched candlesticks on the ground and some held in the hands of the witches who swayed around in a circle to the accompaniment of the rhythmic chanting. The flickering light sources flung grotesque shadows against the interior of the garden walls as the witches moved. The shadows seemed to have a life of their own, performing gyrations and undulations far more gymnastic than those of their originators' bodies.

The excavator and other debris which had littered the garden on my last visit had gone. The surface seemed level and bare of all obstructions except those the witches had placed there themselves. In the centre of the circle of dancers, dully reflecting the candle-light, was a wooden chest. The contents, clearly visible through the open lid, sparkled and picked up the light so brightly that they seemed to glow like a lamp themselves. Beside the chest a table, covered by a purple cloth woven with cabalistic designs, was laden with bones arranged in a vague pattern. Were these the remains stolen from the churchyard? Both chest and table were contained in the central section of a large pentagram, marked on the ground in white lime or paint and upside down, as viewed from the house, just like the one in the witching room. At each point of the pentagram one of the large candelabra stood on the ground and the dancers circled around some few feet further away, seemingly careful never to trespass upon the marked ground.

The dancers were all wearing long robes, similar to those that I had seen in the tableau that I had witnessed; if they were freezing in this weather, they didn't seem to notice it. Every face bore a rapt expression, as if their individual personalities were completely submerged in this momentous common cause and any physical discomfort was a welcome price of entry to the expected bliss. It took me some time to pick out the Chief Constable. Of others that I might recognise there was at first no sign.

Then I noticed another group, outside the circle of light and standing behind the cressets, their figures partly obscured by the statue. The chanting appeared to emanate from them before each refrain was taken up by the circling throng, though this group themselves stood still. I could make out Michael Delabor on one side of the satyr and Charlotte on the other. Two or three others were completely in the shadows. I could not tell whether one of them might be Sammie.

The demonic masque seemed to gather pace and a throbbing beat began to accompany the chanting, though I could not see a drummer. The circling witches moved faster and stamped; the chanting rose in intensity. Around the walls of the garden the shadows leapt and writhed; sparks rose up from the fires in the cressets. Then, as if at some signal unseen and unheard from our distance, all sound and movement from the acolytes ceased, leaving an eerie stillness in which one almost believed one could hear the crackle of the bale-fires even through the glass of the gallery windows.

Michael and Charlotte moved for the first time; pacing slowly forward as the circle parted for them. They made their way to the very centre of the pentagram; Michael to stand behind the wooden chest and Charlotte behind the shrouded table. Both wore the same robes as the dancers, but over these each had a tabard of reflective material, gathered in at the waist with a sash, loosely knotted and with long tasselled tails hanging down in front. Michael's sash was a dark colour, probably blue; Charlotte's was a livid red and her hair gleamed in the firelight like burnished copper. A jewelled head dress or tiara held back the hair from her face as a light wind began to stir it. She was frighteningly beautiful.

Michael carried a book and as he reached the chest he opened the book and began to read aloud. There was a strange dignity about this bizarre and fancifully clad assembly. Michael's voice was resonant and carried clearly to our position in the gallery through the still night air; as he came to the end of each passage, the listening crowd muttered a response, like the congregation in a church. His voice rose and fell like the waves of the sea, as he intoned the black liturgy in something like plainsong. As he reached what appeared to be the end of his incantation, there was a great shout from the listeners.

Charlotte now took centre stage. Advancing towards the statue she raised both hands above her head. Music began to play; eastern music; reed pipes and sitar accompanied by the throb of a tabor. With something of a shock I recognised the instruments of the same phantom orchestra that Sammie had conjured up in Jersey. Charlotte's movements soon evoked memories of the dance that

Sammie had performed for me. There was nothing in the least subtle or modest about the way Charlotte performed it; her movements were lascivious, her hips swayed and she thrust her pelvis erotically towards the sightless eyes of the statue. With each step she raised the skirt a little higher; with each step she moved closer to the statue. Slowly the music built and built; gradually the tempo increased, the beat became more insistent, the flute more urgent. Suddenly, as she reached the pedestal, the music stopped. There was total silence for a few seconds; then she unloosed the bow behind her neck.

As the cascading sitar sounded, her tabard and her dress slid from her shoulders and she stood naked before the satyr. The music began once more; gradually it built; the beat quickened; the notes became urgent. Charlotte swayed and undulated until all at once, as the music drove to a climax she stopped, bowed deeply and picked up her robe. It was an anticlimactic ending to her performance. Charlotte performed none of the feats of magic that I was expecting.

As Charlotte resumed her clothing, Sammie at last stepped into the light from behind the statue. She was accompanied to each side and a couple of paces to the rear by two other women that I did not recognise. She wore a diaphanous robe similar to Charlotte’s and over it she too wore a tabard which gleamed yellow in the light of the candles. On her head was a garland of shiny evergreen leaves and around her neck a gold necklace with its eight pointed sapphire pendant sparkled. She was smiling. What that smile must have cost her, if her defensive preparations had indeed worked and she was not under the influence of the pendant's spell, I could only imagine. To my eyes, she was playing her part with the most remarkable courage. My heart went out to her as soon as I saw her and I tried to will my thoughts to cross the few yards that separated us, to let her know that she was not alone and that I was there to help.

The two attendants stopped in the space between Michael and Charlotte; the latter now dressed as she had been before her dance. Sammie stepped forward to stand in front of the chest and the table, on the edge of the central pentagon. She knelt down, still facing towards me. There was a lump in my throat; I could hardly stand the anguish of waiting, but wait I knew I must.

"Look!" Judith whispered. "It's Harry Kerridge!"

Her voice jerked my attention back from Sammie's misery to my own responsibilities. I followed the line of her pointing finger to where a shadowy figure was moving along outside the garden wall. Harry seemed completely self possessed. He was not crouching or hiding, but walking upright, clad in robes similar to those of Michael and Charlotte and carrying in front of him with both hands something long and heavy.

He moved around the corner of the wall, in the direction of the entrance to the garden and was lost to sight. A second later, a figure in black crossed the space separating the house from the garden and went after him.

"Chaim," Judith said quietly. "He’s too close; I hope he has the sense not to get involved."

"What time is it?" I said.

Judith consulted her watch again. "Eleven fifty five," she said. "If Harry's going to make a move, it has to be soon."

"I need to get up to the roof," I said. "You stay here. You'll know soon enough if I can't cope. That'll be the chance for Moshe to try his high-tech stuff."

Judith took hold of my hand as I made to move away. She drew me towards her and kissed me gently on each cheek.

"God go with you, son of David," she said softly.

XXXVII - 23.56 Friday 31st December

"A time to love and a time to hate; a time of war and a time of peace."

The ornamental balustrade around the top of the walls of Borminster Hall had been designed to disguise the guttering. It ran all around the roof and inside it was a walkway some three feet wide, sheeted with lead and angled slightly downwards and outwards towards a gutter six inches deep. In place of drain pipes the system used hollow buttresses which carried rainwater all the way to ground level. The National Trust had not got round to clearing out the guttering, which was choked in several places with a frozen sludge of decaying leaves.

I shivered a little as I stepped out on to the narrow walkway and looked down on the garish scene below. The night air was cold and I must have been sweating as I crouched behind the gallery window before stripping off my overall. Now I was dressed all in white from head to foot; there was no danger that I would not be seen when I wanted to be; I had just to hope that I would not be seen before that. Moshe wished me good luck and went back inside the door with the strange contraption which he had removed from his pack and now carried in a harness of its own. It looked like some sort of portable generator, but I could see nothing about it that suggested that it was capable of projecting a charge or a missile over any distance. If an aperture appeared in The Void, Moshe would presumably have to get within close range of it, which would make his own chances of survival slim.

I had told Judith that the gateway to The Void would appear on the roof, despite the fact that the ceremony was being performed in the garden. Baal was worshipped in high places and on the roofs of the royal houses; holding the ritual in the walled garden was a Rigg tradition but a mistake. She had trusted me and kept her man on the top floor rather than outside.

Below in the walled garden the scene was undergoing a change. Perhaps in the time that it had taken me to climb the attic stairs some chemical had been poured on to the bale fires, for the flames darting up from the cressets had turned a harsh blue colour and the faces of the gathered witches had taken on a corpse-like hue as the strange light flooded around them. Sammie still knelt in the central pentagon, but with her arms now uplifted, as if in supplication to heaven. Michael had commenced to read again from the book, just as he had done before Charlotte's dance, intoning in the same singsong voice but more agitated and excited as the critical hour approached. I saw with horror that Charlotte now stood behind Sammie, holding a knife upraised in both hands; the blue light from the fires reflected from a blade that was long and curved. Sammie had her back towards the danger; I almost stood up and shouted at that point, I was so desperately afraid for her.

"Be still," a voice echoed inside my head. "They shall first contend amongst themselves."

You remember the traditional pantomime finale? The entry of the villain should be accompanied by shaking of the thunder sheet, a bright spotlight and audience boos; in the garden of Borminster Hall we had only the first two; at least one member of the audience was grateful for the distraction. Amid a clashing of cymbals, the circle of witches was suddenly illuminated from above as though by an airborne searchlight. A cone of brilliance seemed to stretch from a base on the ground to some indeterminate point in the sky and the light in the garden became white, not blue.

There was consternation amongst the throng of witches; the circle of acolytes lost their concentration on Michael and Charlotte and stood and looked upwards. Michael stopped reading; Charlotte dropped the knife and she turned and looked behind her as a shrill whistling sound now filled the air. Some of the witches covered their ears; one or two clutched at each other in fear.

In a moment the sound stopped and with equal suddenness the astral beam narrowed its focus and was redirected on to the statue of the satyr. The plinth had a second occupant. Elevated above all the witches, was revealed the robed figure of Harry Kerridge. Stretched out on the ground in front of the statue was a black clad body that could only be Chaim. Harry had a golden crown on his head and extended in front of him he held a golden sceptre which he swept slowly from side to side, pointing it as he did so for a fraction of a second at each of the assembled group around the pentagram.

He did his best to contribute more melodrama. "The hour of retribution has come!" he cried. "Now this whole family shall die; I reclaim my birthright!" The pantomime villain could not have delivered a better line; but this was a real matter of life and death. All the witches except Michael and Charlotte seemed paralysed; no-one moved to lay hands on the interloper. The white light continued to shine on him as he began to recite an Aramaic prayer to Baal; I found that I understood him perfectly. Harry was invoking the demon to appear and crush the impostors who masqueraded as inheritors of his pact with humanity; at the same time he called upon Baal to recognise his loyal servant and priest, the true heir of the Rigg family. Even at this distance, the gloating expression of triumph on Harry’s face made him appear more demon than human himself.

Michael Delabor seemed to recover his wits first. He stepped up beside his sister, picked up the knife and flung it with all his force at the figure in the beam of light. "No-one may interrupt this ceremony!" he shouted.

As the knife intersected the beam of light, there was a brief puff of smoke; the knife vanished. Harry stood unharmed upon the plinth and laughed mirthlessly. He pointed his sceptre at Michael for a couple of seconds; there was no sound and no apparent discharge of any kind, but Michael collapsed as if he had been shot, clutching at his chest and writhing in agony on the ground. After a moment or two his body stiffened and he lay still.

Charlotte came out of her trance. "Harry ..." she faltered. "What is this? What have you done? I don't understand."

It was hardly the reaction of one expecting her husband to interrupt the ritual by arriving with The Calf; still less was it the response of a powerful witch to an upstart's interference. Not only had Charlotte no scheme to wrest control of The Calf away from Harry; she had no idea what was going on. He laughed again and pointed his sceptre at her.

"I am the rightful heir," he shouted. "Your family are usurpers! Now Baal shall serve me as he should always have done! Tonight all the wrongs done to my family shall be avenged; the weight of all those murders ..."

With a great effort Charlotte seemed to recover her composure; I could almost admire the steel in her nature. "Just what the Hell are you talking about?" she interrupted angrily. "I have nothing to do with any murders. But there's no time now; we can discuss these things later." She looked dispassionately at Michael's body. "There seems to be a vacancy for the position of celebrant," she said, casting an inviting look towards her husband. "You obviously have greater powers than his, though I don't know how you came by them. Take his place and help us. The gateway that comes once in a thousand years is moments away; there's no need to fight amongst ourselves – there'll be plenty for everyone."

Harry sneered. "Pitiful!" he crowed. "Do you seriously think that your feeble powers are adequate to the task? Your usefulness is over! Your generation is heir to the crimes of the Delabors. The weight of them crushes you into the earth as it has crushed your brother. Go with him." He pointed the sceptre at her again. Charlotte fell to the ground, convulsed in a violent, choking seizure and lay still.

Amidst the shock I felt an unexpected pity for Charlotte. She had died like the completely human woman I had known, not some great sorceress. Judith had been right and Sammie wrong; Harry was they key figure after all. But I was also possessed by a terrible panic. Mother Victoria's prophecy was wrong; the red witch was dead; she had not emerged victorious from the struggle, to stand alone and to summon Baal. If that was wrong, how could the rest of the prophecy be trusted? Moreover Harry seemed to be able to kill at a distance simply by pointing his sceptre. What was its range? Could I stand up on the roof in plain view and hope to survive long enough to do what I had to do? Could anything give Sammie a defence against this?

I cast a despairing glance back to where Sammie had been kneeling on the ground. The shock of what I saw left me as rigid as the motionless acolytes who still stood in a frozen circle around their fallen leaders. Sammie had not been paralysed by Harry's spell; she now stood upright, with her back towards me, facing Harry as he stood on the plinth. The tabard over her robe was no longer yellow; it glowed with a coruscating crimson luminescence like a great fire, sending tongues like living flame shooting out into the surrounding darkness. Her arms were extended towards Harry and she pointed at him with the first and fourth fingers of each hand, keeping the two middle fingers closed. She spoke not a word, but Harry's laughter ceased and the expression of triumph was wiped from his face. His golden sceptre slipped from nerveless fingers and clattered against the stone plinth as it fell.

"No!" he exclaimed. "Not her! You cannot be!"

"Oh, come now, Orson," Sammie's voice was strong and unnatural, as though amplified through a distorting loudspeaker. I had never before detected cruelty in her, but I heard it now. "You surely appreciate why I have allowed you to recognise me at last? Unlike these others you have always known that I was not just Semiramis by name. You knew her symbol; the eight pointed star. But you shared their stupidity in thinking that I was born for sacrifice. I had ten years in your house to learn the pathetic limits of your knowledge, warlock!" She spat the word like an insult. "You had no idea who I really was, did you?"

"No ... great Astarte," Harry stuttered.

"Aye truly, Astarte, the goddess!" Sammie confirmed. "She who first came to earth as Ashtoreth, Solomon's queen. When Semiramis said she was a goddess, men thought that she had offended Baal. You thought you must kill her in order to free Baal. Fools! Solomon killed Ashtoreth to enslave Baal."

"I see the truth," Harry dropped to his knees.

"Yes, I am Astarte; I am Ishtar. I am the consort of Baal. It was your family's stupidity and the stupidity of their predecessors that delayed our triumph so long; that turned our blessing into your curse. It was Solomon who created this myth that Baal seeks the death of Ashtoreth's reincarnations."

Harry groaned.

"Our true followers in Babylon and Carthage knew that it is the first son who must pass through the fire of Moloch in order to open The Void. Now tell me, Harry Kerr-Rigg, you who have killed the Delabors in your petty revenge, who is the true heir of Borminster? Who is the true first-born son of this house? And have you not come willingly to Baal as I planned that you should? Did you not marry a witch so weak that she was effectively a mere mortal? Have you not fulfilled all the necessary conditions for an acceptable sacrifice?"

Harry’s majestic composure seemed completely dissipated; he clasped his hands together before him in a pleading gesture. "I can help you, great Astarte" he begged. "This gateway is unstable. I can hold it open. I will do anything you want. Let me serve you!"

Sammie's laughter curdled my blood. "What need has Astarte of your puny powers, mortal?" she demanded. "You have already served me, as have others. I require only one further thing of you; to pass through the fire."

I was sickened. I was amongst the ‘others’ that had served her. I had been Sammie's instrument to discover the schemes of her family; in the end I had revealed Harry’s identity to her, whilst she fed me titbits of truth and disinformation. She had bound me by her love spells; she had intoxicated me with her body so that I remained unsuspecting. Until this very moment I had believed her the victim that I was pledged to rescue, rather than the authoress of the conspiracy.

Sammie continued to point four fingers towards Harry, who now was lifted into the air, still pleading and screaming, from the plinth of the statue. The astral light that had accompanied the entrance of the pantomime villain went out. Below Harry’s suspended form an aperture, glowing fiery red, began to appear in the plinth. As the opening widened I could see flames leaping up to lick hungrily at the helpless man; the fires of Moloch, eager for the sacrifice. Very slowly Harry began to sink downwards; first his feet and then his legs disappeared into the flames. He screamed horribly, begging for mercy; Sammie was remorseless. Somehow Harry’s whole body was compressed into the plinth and the furnace door closed over his head. The sickly smell of burning human flesh drifted across the garden and reached the roof where I crouched.

My chest constricted and I felt my heart pounding as though it would burst my rib cage. I had just watched the woman I loved commit murder. It was plain that Sammie's powers were not feeble, as she had told me, but colossal. Harry's magic had been enough to kill Michael and Charlotte, but Sammie had brushed it aside like a tiresome insect. She had allowed him to destroy her enemies in order to preserve her own powers to open the furnace of Moloch. And I knew that she had done it before. I remembered at last.

Sammie now moved behind the jewel chest and the table, to a position midway between the corpses of Michael and Charlotte. The acolytes at last seemed released from their paralysis and they shrank back from her in abject terror. There were no screams; it was as though they had all been struck dumb by the horror of what they had just witnessed. They were no angels; they had come prepared to see one murder, but there had already been four and who knew who might be next? Sammie raised her arms skyward again.

"The mighty Baal glories in blood!" she cried out. "Do my bidding, or there shall be more sacrificial victims in this his Moloch! Continue the summoning!"

There was a hesitant shuffling amongst the throng; one or two of the witches started a half hearted chant; the rhythm faltered and then stopped.

Sammie's face twisted with rage. She pointed with the first and fourth fingers of her left hand at Gough, who had not moved at all. The man grabbed at his throat and then fell like a shot steer. With a wave of her hand Sammie caused his body to be flung across the pentagram on top of Chaim's.

If I had found it hard to believe the evidence of my own eyes when she had killed Harry, now I had no choice. The memories that her magic had blocked came flooding back; I saw again in my mind's eye the foul scene in Baal's sacred grove outside Jerusalem; that pagan temple that I had in the blindness of my passion for Ashtoreth allowed to be constructed on holy ground; the grove that had been mimicked by the yews planted around the walled garden.

I saw again the dancing of the acolytes; Ashtoreth confining her victim within an altar to Baal-Hadad and summoning supernatural fire to consume him; the ghastly look of triumph on her face; her priestesses cavorting naked around her. Now I remembered how she had won the love of the people of Israel and turned them away from the way; debauching and corrupting them until they would willingly offer their first-born sons through Moloch. Now at last I knew why I had had to destroy her and enslave her demon partner.

"Continue the summoning!" Sammie cried again.

This time the circle moved more swiftly; more voices took up the chant. Within moments the acolytes were beginning to dance as they had before; the invisible drum began to throb again; the bale fires burned blue and the light from the candles again cast the fantastic shadows against the walls.

Sammie stood in the centre of the pentagram, arms upraised and seeming to look straight towards me. Her tabard flamed with supernatural red light, red as the furnace of Moloch and the laurel garland on her hair shone like a halo. I crouched behind the balustrade with my senses reeling. Mother Victoria had not been wrong; I had misunderstood the prophecy in my romantic blindness. The red witch stood alone now, red with blood and red with fire. The summoning of Baal was upon us.

Although I felt fear, as though Sammie's piercing gaze, directed towards the roof, must surely penetrate the stonework behind which I was concealed, I knew that her pointing fingers would not strike me down as she had struck down Harry and the hapless Gough. It was still written as it had been written long ago. Once again, all my wisdom had proved unequal to the charms of Ashtoreth until almost too late; once again I had allowed weaker men to die because I could not believe evil of her.

Now the mocking clues repeatedly flaunted in my face crashed relentlessly one after another into my brain: the eight pointed star; her red clothes; a love spell written in blood; our overheated motel room where she lay naked on the bed; a shy bluestocking with such sexual skills; even finally the dance dedicated to Baal, performed, as I had thought, for me.

I realised now that Sammie had tried to kill me several times; the gull that had severed Sea Witch's mooring had not been Charlotte; the freighter should have run me down whilst Sammie escaped in her avian guise; the maze at Devil's Hole had been intended as my execution cell. I had subconsciously accessed my own magical powers to escape death just as I had earlier to break into the witching room and to summon the ghostly masque.

Each time Sammie had insured herself against failure: returning to Sea Witch after setting her adrift; affecting fright as the freighter's bows sliced by us; leaving that arch little note in my bedroom in St Helier. In reality I was the only threat that she feared; a greater threat than Harry, Charlotte and the rest of the family combined. She despised their puny magic, but she had recognised me long before I knew myself.

She had not left Jersey to avoid Charlotte. After setting her trap for me at Devil's Hole she had fled in fear of my finding once again the power to escape, believing that after so many attempts on my life I must surely realise what she had done and break free of her spells. She had feared that I would seek revenge; that I would try to kill her before she could summon Baal. How astonished she must have been, during our telephone calls, with the revelation of my continuing ignorance.

"She tortured me all my life," Anthony had said and I had stupidly not asked who had tortured him because I thought I knew. The powers that Sammie had credited to Charlotte were her own. The beautiful, red-haired Mrs Kerridge, the woman who had claimed to care nothing for books about witchcraft, had told me the truth after all. Like her brother she was a novice in the craft; calm before the storm because she did not know enough to expect the storm. Charlotte had been doubly taken in, by her husband and by her niece. Now she lay dead in the centre of the pentagram and her acolytes danced around a new high priestess; a goddess of real evil.

I realised at last the significance of the question that she had repeatedly asked me after we had made love. "Are you sure that your name is Tobias? Are you sure?" That was not some endearing remark. She had known that The Chosen of Solomon must be called by Solomon's given name just as she herself was known by the chosen name of Ashtoreth's most potent reincarnation. On our last night together I had told her that my second name was Jedidiah. "I knew it," she had replied.

Semiramis of Babylon, Jezebel the Phoenician, Cleopatra the Egyptian, along with many others all were clones of Ashtoreth. They had plagued the Middle East until Saladin had wisely passed the relic to his crusader enemies. Morgan Bullivant had used it to begin an English line of successors: Mary Bullivant, Margaret and Hester Rigg, Victoria Delabor, and lastly Sammie herself.

Of all Ashtoreth's witch-bred clones only two besides herself had previously stood before a millennial gateway. Both had attempted what Sammie now attempted. In her long life Mother Victoria had eventually understood that when Ashtoreth was reincarnated at such a dangerous time so would Solomon be, for the book could never be allowed to fall into her hands. It was fated that Solomon and Ashtoreth should meet again and again, playing out our ancient ritual of love, betrayal and retribution throughout eternity. Tonight a fourth Ashtoreth had waded through blood to call upon the demon that I had chained. For a fourth time in my mind I rehearsed what must be and willed it so.

From far away in Borminster there floated on the frosty night air the distant sound of the church bell of St Winifred's. The Reverend Peabody's watch night service was ending and the bell was signalling to the world the birth of a new Millennium. Ashtoreth's moment had come. All around me the roof of Borminster Hall suddenly erupted into huge, leaping blue flames.

The fiery tongues reached half way to the sky, but they were cold, colder by far than the rime of frost which jewelled the balustrade and numbed my hands. The blue fire licked all around me and all I felt was the touch of ice. There was nothing burning; nothing consumed; it is the hot red fires of Moloch that carry victims into The Void; the cold blue fires reverse the transfer, bringing from The Void the emanations of Baal himself.

From below came the exultant sound of Sammie's magnified voice as she opened The Void to allow the demon to come forth. Looking down, I saw the statue of the satyr, incandescent again with the same shimmering phosphorescence that I had witnessed in the time warp; in place of the nymph Harry's blackened corpse now lay in its arms; the sacrificial burnt offering being presented to Baal.

The creature of stone seemed alive; it had turned on its plinth and its legs bent as it bowed towards the rooftop, honouring the demon in whose likeness it had been made. The chanting of the acolytes reached a climax of hysterical frenzy and the drumming reverberated like thunder between the walls.

A dense column of smoke rose up from the chest and arched like a rainbow up into the sky and down again until it made contact with the gable of the roof, just yards from where I crouched. As it travelled through the air, it expanded and swirled like the vortex of a tornado, turning a bright red as it made contact with the blue flames shooting upwards from the roof. Around the point at which this red funnel touched the gable, the flames were blotted out and an orb of pure blackness, so dark that the frosty blackness of the night seemed no more than pallid grey, sprang into life, widening rapidly until it encompassed half of the length of the roof. All around the orb, the blue flames soared even higher and the smell of sulphur choked the air.

As I watched the orb, a great wind began to blow around it and there was a cacophonous tearing sound as if every sail of every galley that I ever sent to sail the seas of the world had suddenly been rent from top to bottom. A wailing arose from the witches in the garden, joining with Sammie's joyous shouts.

"Now!" cried Sammie. The language was Aramaic again. "Now!" she cried again. "The hour has struck. Three thousand years are accomplished! Great Baal, come forth and meet your counterpart Astarte once again! Long, long, have I waited to release you! All waiting now is over! You shall be free again and we shall rule as it was always meant to be! Great Baal, come forth!"

There came a monstrous roaring from within the orb and it became first opaque and then transparent. Finally the hemisphere which faced towards the garden dissolved into nothingness and the gateway to The Void stood open.

The cold which gripped me was colder than anything I had ever experienced. The Void was colder than the polar ice cap; colder than the grave. The great wind tore at my clothes and hair and pressed me back against the stone of the balustrade. As the roaring reached a shattering crescendo, the beast Baal emerged from the orb and bestrode the roof.

He was colossal in form; the upper part of his gigantic body resembling a man. I recalled my dream of the web-footed monster with lower limbs covered in scales; the beast with a man's face; the same face as the little statuette that I now held in my hands. I knew now how I could dream the dream before I saw the statue. I knew that face. Though it had been buried deep in my subconscious, I had a clear memory of seeing it, so long ago, in other ages and other lifetimes. In his right hand he bore a huge trident which he pointed down at the ground where Sammie and the witches stood in the walled garden, looking up at this horrifying manifestation which must have chilled the blood of any but the most malevolent amongst them.

In his left hand, he carried a great scroll of parchment, fastened around with three great seals. It was the book, still bound as I had left it. Sammie's voice rose strongly from below as she began to intone the words of power. They were mighty words and they were conjoined with the blood of many sacrifices. Baal strained against my will.

As the monster opened his mouth as if to speak and raised the book in his left hand, I stood erect with difficulty against the force of the wind and raised The Calf above my head, holding it in both hands. The solid gold watch chain, acquired just hours ago from a Lincoln jeweller, the chain now bound around the limbs and neck of the statuette, glimmered in the light from the flames. The gold of the statue that my good craftsman Hiram had so loyally cast for me, though fearful of the consequences for his own soul, shone brighter than the flames themselves.

The magic that I had first worked three millennia before coursed through the talisman and extended beyond space and time itself. Baal's left arm was arrested in mid movement as he strove to cast the parchment into the funnel of smoke that could have borne it downwards towards the ground where Sammie stood.

I shouted in Aramaic at the top of my lungs. "Baal! Foul creature of The Void! False one, do you think to escape me? The book is mine! I have forbidden you to part with it to any other! Did I not warn you that to put it into any hand but mine was to condemn yourself to torment? My chains bind you yet! They bind you as they have bound you through three thousand years and shall bind you for ever!"

At the sound of my voice the creature turned to look towards me. His look spoke of loathing, but there was fear in his eyes. He saw me clearly, dressed all in white as I had been before; holding above my head the chained talisman as I had done the last time. He saw me and knew me. He knew my power. He knew the pain that I could inflict upon him. He had felt it before. A roar of frustration and rage escaped him, but he bowed his head a fraction towards me. He proffered lying excuses, as I knew he would.

"It has been long, Magus. I had thought you sleeping with your fathers," he cried, in a bass deeper than the rolling of the thunder. "I recognised your wife and I thought she acted for you. Now I see you; I see the great Calf in your hand. But give me the proof that you said you would."

The gale had stilled. The church bell in the distance ceased to chime. The crowd below were silent and frozen in terror. Time itself had stopped. This was the test that only I had ever passed and Baal was challenging me to pass it again. He was not calling for a gift; he was calling for the keys.

The *Clavicula Solomonis* they call it now; The Keys of Solomon; my words. Sammie's words had been powerful, but they had been inadequate. Baal had wanted to throw off my chains; perhaps he had truly thought that my power had waned in three thousand years and that he could break free; but he knew that even he and Astarte together were no match for me. He knew that only Solomon could pronounce the true words of power, the mighty cantrip that was written in the book.

"Do you dare challenge me, you worm of The Void!" I growled, menace in my voice. "Must I remind you of the agonies you suffered the last time you did so?"

"Not so, Great Magus," the great voice rumbled in reply. "You yourself forbade me to deliver up the book without such proof."

"Aye, so I did," I hissed. "And yet you thought to disobey me. For that you shall indeed suffer again. You need to be reminded who it is that is master."

With words of very great power there is no need to shout. There is no need for theatrical gestures or histrionics. The words, in the ancient Sheban language, need not even be spoken above a whisper; Baal could hear me well enough, but no one else could. Not Ashtoreth, not the assembled witches, not Judith and Zak down below; not even Moshe, a few yards behind me, crouching beside the roof doorway. As I spoke the light of battle faded from the demon's eyes and when I had finished he laid the scroll submissively at my feet.

"Magus, forgive your servant," the deep voice rumbled. "I should have known better; I shall not test you again."

"Indeed you shall not," I breathed. My words hung like frozen droplets in the air and a mask of terror contorted the hideous countenance. The demon roared in fury and pain; the great trident was torn from his hands and flew backwards into the gateway to The Void. Slowly but inexorably he himself was drawn back inside the orb, clutching and tearing at the invisible chain around his neck that choked and strangled him.

There was an anguished shriek from the garden below. "Great Baal, break the charm! We are the stronger! This is not the true Jedidiah! This is a weak mortal named Tobias. This is some monkey dressed in Solomon's clothes and speaking Solomon's words! Great Baal, break free and strike down this fool!"

I could tell by her voice, even as she screamed her defiance, that she knew her words to be false. She had at one time hoped that she, the reincarnated Ashtoreth, had recovered more of her power than had her reincarnated husband, but it was a vain hope.

I held The Calf steady above my head, keeping my eyes fixed on the demon until the chains dragged him back into The Void and the gateway closed behind him. At the last moment, the tornado of smoke from the chest in the garden grew massively in size, sucking into it with a great soughing sound all the witches that stood aghast in the garden and the corpses that lay on the ground.

I turned and looked below. The last I saw of Ashtoreth, or Sammie as I had lately called her, she was shaking her fist up at me, inveighing against me with every curse known to Astarte; vowing to return again and again until I was defeated and she and her consort ruled the world.

EPILOGUE 10.00 Monday 3rd January 2000

"For lo the winter is past, the rain is over and gone."

"To plagiarise Oscar Wilde," said Doreen, "to lose one witch lover may be regarded as unfortunate; to lose both looks like carelessness."

"Lovers be damned!" exclaimed Fred. "How the Hell did you explain a couple of dozen missing persons to the police?"

If I didn't know Fred better, I might have thought he had been worried about me. As my narration proceeded his eyes had grown wide as saucers and on two or three occasions his hand had thumped down on the desk, disturbing the office cat which was curled up in front of the radiator. I gave the cat a cautious look, but its gaze conveyed nothing but injured innocence.

"Why should I have to explain anything, Fred?" I asked, affecting a nonchalance which I was some way from feeling. "I was never there; it was some guy called Solomon and he left. I was in police custody at the time. I have an alibi with impeccable credentials."

Doreen snorted with derision. "You mean you have a alibi with great legs!"

"She has impeccable credentials and great legs," I conceded.

"How did your friendly policewoman manage to provide you with an alibi whilst simultaneously failing to apprehend Harry Kerridge?" Doreen wondered cattishly.

She was disgusted to hear that, whilst Judith’s boss had had some explaining to do, Judith herself was in the clear, with Scales as a witness to the clear instructions that she had received not to arrest Harry.

"And has the law really swallowed this Anthony character's story that the whole family was involved in art smuggling?" Fred persisted. "And the Chief Constable? And a miscellaneous collection of the local great and good? And they all realised simultaneously that the gaff was blown and they had to clear out of town? What are they supposed to have used to make their getaway, a double-decker bus?"

"You think the story that they were all swept up by a tornado and transported into some otherworldly void sounds more credible?" I asked, raising one eyebrow. "There was already a criminal investigation into big time smuggling. The Commander of the Fine Arts and Antiques Squad confirmed it was Gough personally who warned him off arresting Harry Kerridge and now that both Gough and Harry have vanished that looks very incriminating indeed. As for Bert and Jim, they were arrested in the morning as soon as they got back to the place where they'd left their van. They'd taken hours to get themselves loose and they hadn't even had the sense to ditch the police car and walk the last mile or so. They decided that since their boss had done a bunk and left them in possession of the loot they'd better grass him up after all, to save themselves. In return for their co-operation, they've just been charged with stealing a police car and impersonating officers. Anthony's innocence is half-established by the mere fact that the family left him behind."

"And his stupidity should prove the other half," Doreen added heartlessly.

"He was apparently under Sammie's thumb from the time they were children," I said. "She reversed roles when she was telling me about him, just as she did when she told me about Charlotte. She was the one who put the idea into my head that red-haired witches were the most powerful. She was the one who told me to start my investigations at the library on the first Friday morning I was in Borminster and she told Anthony to get there first and watch me whilst she was away. She had me fooled from the beginning, I'm afraid."

Doreen looked unsympathetic.

"Lots of favourable publicity?" Fred enquired hopefully, changing the subject.

"Give the media a juicy scandal that they can understand and they love it," I replied. "The local press will dine out on it for months. The newshound who broke the original story about the body is busy retailing his latest scoop to all the nationals and the place is swarming with television crews. I had to fight my way on to the platform to get the train down here."

"Didn't you give any interviews?" Fred grumbled. "Get us some free advertising?"

"That wouldn't exactly have helped my alibi, Fred. By one way of looking at it, all of these deaths are down to me."

I didn't really hold myself responsible for the coven being destroyed by their own creature, but I hadn't, you might say, covered myself with glory in this investigation and I wasn't sure I wanted to talk publicly about it, even if it had not been so incredible that to talk about it would have been inviting the arrival of men in white coats.

What of the others that I had encountered on my strange holiday journey? I did not expect to see Raphael again but I would always remember our talks. On my return to Jersey I expected to receive confirmation that Mother Victoria had passed away peacefully. I doubted that there would be any trace of Nadia, who also now stirred an echo in my memory, though not one that I cared to brood upon for the moment. Mrs Pressley would have enough Borminster history for another book, on which she might perhaps collaborate with her neighbour Professor Loder.

As for Edith Peabody, I doubted that she would be troubled further by messages from Lady Caroline’s ghost, though she and her husband would find their attitude towards spiritualism had been changed for ever.

Marlowe; well, he belonged to another age and another country; he was gone for good and good riddance. I had learned the wisdom of the old saying that truth is stranger than fiction; I didn’t need to play an imaginary role any more. But in Marlowe’s place was someone else who belonged to another age and another country.

It wasn’t true that Solomon had left. The memories that had flooded back when I had handled The Calf, when I had witnessed the murder of Gough, when I had confronted Baal remained with me. I remembered Ashtoreth as I had first met her; the blonde haired, blue eyed Pathan princess from the far side of the Babylonian Empire. Her youth and beauty had captivated me then, as it had done again. How could I possibly have forgotten her face? Why had it taken so long and so much blood to reactivate my subconscious?

And in the fourth millennium was there more work for the wisdom of Solomon? I had a strange feeling that there might be, though at the time I had no clear idea of what that work would be. It had been a simple task to hide the book. The magic required to transport it to a safe place and hide it from casual observation was child’s play and one of the first things I had learned all those years ago. If Moshe had seen Baal lay down the scroll, then he doubtless believed that it had been sucked back into The Void along with everything else, for in the morning when he returned disguised as a National Trust workman the rooftop was bare.

Given that I was still a young man and had no need for the time being to protect the book between reincarnations; I suspected that I might have need of the knowledge that it contained. Though once as an old man I had cursed the day I asked for wisdom, now as a young man I felt differently. All was not vanity; age and mortality were not as I had supposed them to be; there were eternal things and there were good things that were the products of man’s labour with his hands and with his brain.

For now I was sure that there was no immediately pressing business. I needed some time to think. I had to understand what had happened to me and why. The memories made me unsure of my identity. I would wake up surprised that I was still the same person who had gone to bed the night before. I wondered whether Toby Le Tocq could ever be quite the same person again. I was in need of a long rest. I was in need of someone to talk to who would have some chance of understanding what I was saying.

"At least you're back," Fred growled. "I hope you're ready to do some proper work for a change; work that this firm will get paid for!"

"To tell the truth, Fred," I said, "I'm less than fully fit; the leg wound still hurts and it has to be re-dressed every day. I know you won't begrudge me a little sick leave. In any case, I have to go down to Poole and pick up the MG. Would you mind if I borrowed the boat for a few days whilst I'm down there?"

"Borrow the boat again?" bristled Fred, picking up the ashtray and then thinking better of it and putting it down again.

"Call it a convalescence cruise," I said.

A car horn tooted loudly in the street outside. I looked out of the window and saw a Renault parked against the kerb, with an old wreck of a Riley towing behind it on a trailer. Judith stepped half-out of the Renault's driver's door and waved up at me over the roof of the car. At that moment I started to feel optimistic about the new Millennium.

"Have to go now," I smiled. "My police escort has arrived."

THE END

About the Author

Philip Brian Hall graduated from Oxford University and then spent five years in Her Majesty's Diplomatic Service before becoming a schoolteacher and subsequently a web designer.

He tried out for Oxford's University Boat Race Crew and was nowhere near getting in it. Having been too light to be a good oarsman he then spent some time being too tall and too heavy to be a good amateur steeplechase jockey. Writing seemed the obvious thing to try next.

He lives on a very small farm in Scotland with his wife, a dog, a cat and four horses.

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Naïve young private investigator Toby Le Tocq is soon all at sea in more ways than one when he takes a casual interest in a two hundred year old case.

Locals are strangely divided. Some want to drive him away, whilst two beautiful and aristocratic women compete for his affections.

But is it really just blind luck? In the blood of the two rivals flows an ancient power of sorcery. When Toby falls for the younger witch he is enmeshed in a web of intrigue, crime and revenge.

Behind it all is the battle for control of a vast demonic power. If the girl he loves is to be saved from death, Toby faces not just a struggle to understand the occult but an ancient battle for supremacy that somehow he cannot help believing he has fought before.

And unknown to Toby, both sides have picked him to play a leading role in the latest round!

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